FEB 1950

REAL WESTERN STORIES

FEB 1950 15¢

HIDDEN RANGE

by Tex Riley

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

REAL WESTERN STORIES

HIDDEN RANGE by TEX RILEY

"How I Became a Hotel Hostess"

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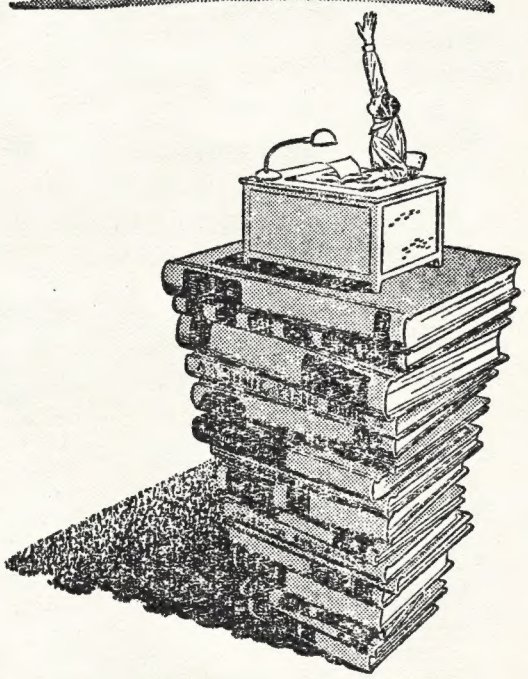

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Volume 15, Number 5
February 1950

REAL WESTERN STORIES

Book - Length Novel

★ HIDDEN RANGE ★

by Tex Riley 8

Sullen hate filled the Ridge country, and Lannigan found himself caught up in it, involved in the feud between the Arrowhead and the Double C. But there was a mystery running deep beneath the surface, and Lannigan found that his life, and the safety of the woman he loved depended on his uncovering a riddle, the existence of which no one else apparently suspected.

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by Practicing in Spare Time

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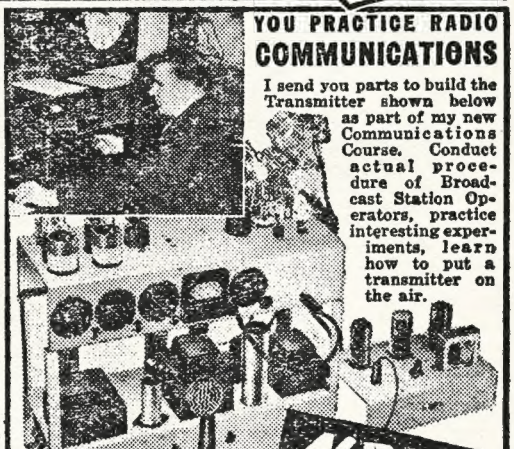

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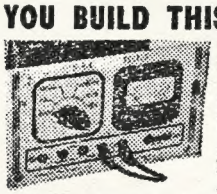

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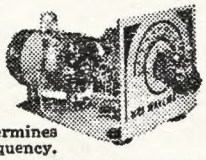

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where it shows most

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most any part of the body with

SPOT REDUCER

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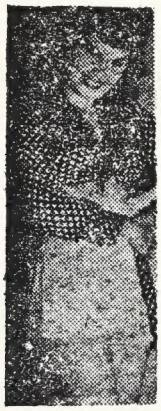
Marie Hammel, New York, N. Y., says: "I used to wear a size 20 dress, now I wear size 14, thanks to the Spot Reducer. It was fun and I enjoyed it."



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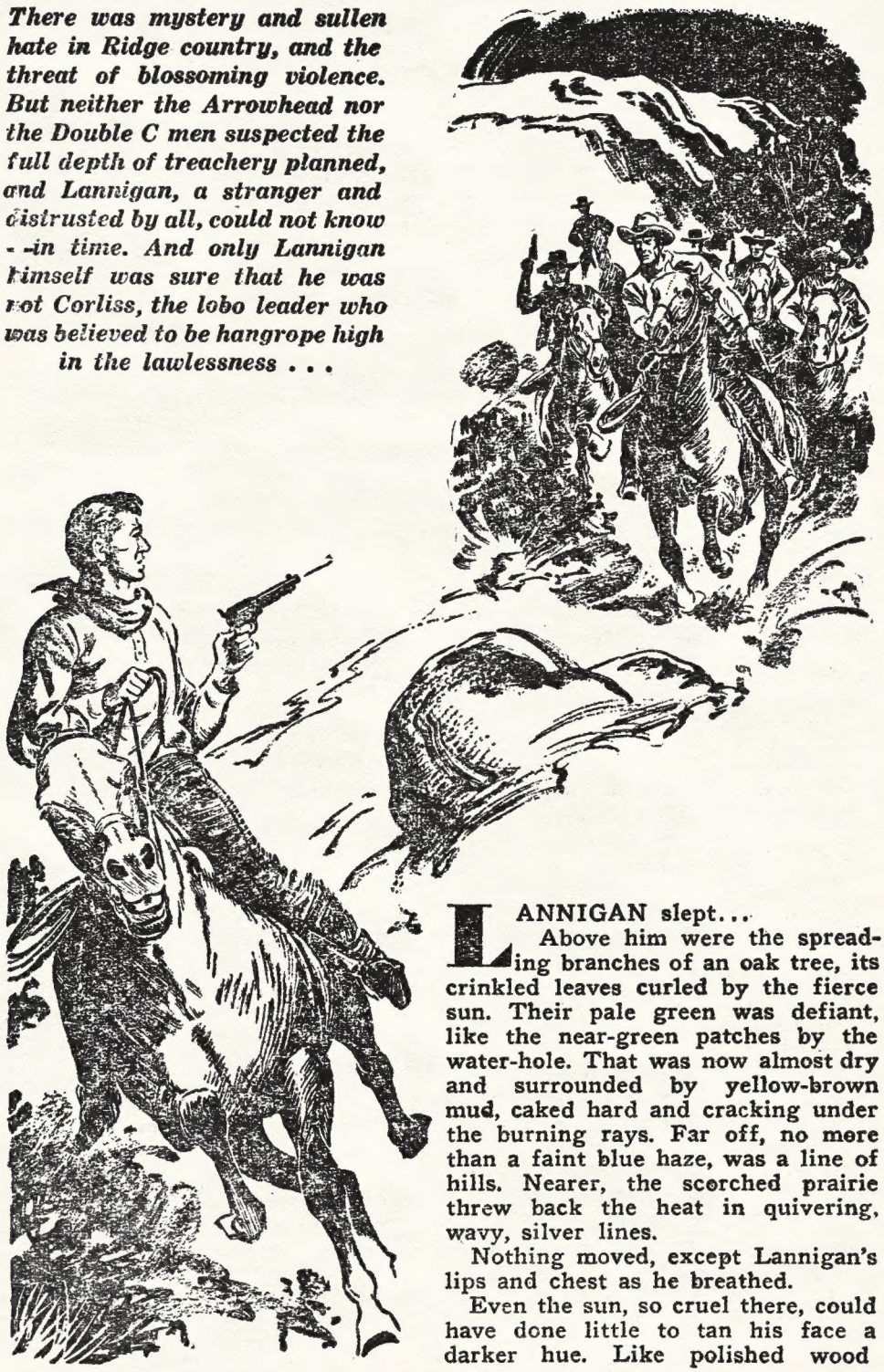
HIDDEN RANGE

by Tex Riley

First Magazine Publication of This Action - Packed Complete Book - Length Novel

There was mystery and sullen hate in Ridge country, and the threat of blossoming violence. But neither the Arrowhead nor the Double C men suspected the full depth of treachery planned, and Lannigan, a stranger and distrusted by all, could not know - -in time. And only Lannigan himself was sure that he was not Corliss, the lobo leader who was believed to be hangrope high in the lawlessness . . .



LANNIGAN slept...

Above him were the spreading branches of an oak tree, its crinkled leaves curled by the fierce sun. Their pale green was defiant, like the near-green patches by the water-hole. That was now almost dry and surrounded by yellow-brown mud, caked hard and cracking under the burning rays. Far off, no more than a faint blue haze, was a line of hills. Nearer, the scorched prairie threw back the heat in quivering, wavy, silver lines.

Nothing moved, except Lannigan's lips and chest as he breathed.

Even the sun, so cruel there, could have done little to tan his face a darker hue. Like polished wood

smooth where there was no dark stubble, it was lined only at his eyes, which were narrowed as if even in sleep he wanted to keep the sun away from them.

His broad-brimmed hat was lying behind his head; he had been so tired that he had not taken it off. His right hand rested against his thigh, his left on his chest. He slept, breathing evenly, dreaming perhaps but certainly not dreaming of what had been done to him.

There were other trees, but not many, and Lannigan had chosen the one with the thickest foliage, to give him most protection from the sun, which was nearly overhead. His head was only a few inches from the gnarled trunk. Further away were three gaping walls of an old derelict shack.

Lannigan stirred.

His first movement was with his hands. They went still immediately, but only for a few moments. Then he pulled up his legs, gently, as if stretching. He stopped again, but there was a noticeable change in his attitude. His body no longer looked relaxed; it was tense. After a moment which seemed to last a long time, his right hand moved up a little; he was feeling for his gun.

He felt only the leather of his holster.

He opened his eyes. The leaves were not moving, and through them were tiny chinks of the brassy sky. He moved his right hand again, touching his belt, making sure that his fears were right, and that the gun was gone. Then he raised his head and looked down; his eyes confirmed what his hands had told him. From there, his gaze travelled towards his right foot. The first thing that had warned him that all was not well had been a tug at his right foot, as if someone were holding it. There was a loop of rope tied about his rowel-less spurs. The rope stretched to another tree, a few yards away from him, and was drawn tight.

He hitched himself up on his elbows and gazed, wondering, looked across towards the caked mud of the water-hole. It was shaded on one side by two dwarf oak trees growing close together. There his horse—

There was no horse.

Lannigan's lips tightened. He leaned forward and loosened his spurs, then hitched himself up and sat with his back against the tree.

He stared at the tree where he had tethered his horse, with the rope now curling like a snake on the ground. Near it he had left all his belongings, taken from the horse to give it some rest.

He spoke, "Now, Lannigan, don't get mad."

Just then, he had a curiously soft voice. His nostrils were distended and in spite of his words there was the unmistakable look of anger about him. But he repeated the warning: "Now, Lannigan, don't get mad." He sat there for a while, wide awake now, his gaze travelling about the water-hole, seeing the traces of the men who had robbed him. Three men, he now realized; there were three sets of footprints, but no sign of hoof-prints.

He touched his belt; they had left him that. Could they have taken his roll, too? Exactly two hundred dollars had been in that roll when he had lain down to sleep. If they had taken it, they must have touched his body, and he could not believe he had slept so heavily that he had allowed that without waking up. His fingers crept about the belt to the pouch, on the left side. The pouch was fastened with a clip on the inside, for extra safety. The clip was fastened.

He felt paper.

"Well," he said, "they had the sense not to touch me too much." To make sure that he had not been robbed of his roll, he took it out and, slowly and deliberately, counted the five dollar bills. They were old and worn but good currency and there were forty of them. His lips relaxed. There was a little to salve his injured vanity, he had not slept

while strangers had prodded his stomach.

He sat looking at the notes. His lips curved at the corners. Soon he was grinning, showing his firm teeth. The grin was a little foolish, because he felt foolish. There he was, rejoicing because he had two hundred dollars, and the only use those five-dollar bills were to him was paper—paper to start a fire, maybe. He couldn't buy a horse. He couldn't go up to one of the trees and say: "Sure, I'll have bacon and eggs." The only thing there that he needed and he could get was his for the asking—water. That was another thing in his favour, at least they hadn't been able to take up the water-hole. But he knew from his experience when he had ridden in here that the water oozed slowly up to the surface, and he also knew that the sun evaporated it almost as soon as it showed, leaving only the centre of the hole moist—just moist, without enough water for drinking. It would be nightfall before he could rely on getting water from it, unless he dug deep; and what had he to dig with?

"Lannigan," he said, "yuh're up against it this time."

HE GOT slowly to his feet, stretched, and looked about him. The heat haze was rippling up from the prairie, dazzling him. The trail, worn by stray wayfarers over a century of years, went straight towards the distant grey haze. If his calculations had been right that morning, the hills were fifteen miles away, and beyond them it was another thirty and more to Ridge City. If anyone asked him why he wanted to go to Ridge City, he could not have answered. It just happened to be a place on a map a long way from anywhere else.

He ventured out into the sun. It was hot and airless beneath the tree, but the shade was like an ice-box compared with the fierce heat out here. He moved quickly, a man of more than medium height, lean, with broad shoulders; a rangy-looking man. He reached the shade of the tree where he had left the horse, and examined the ground. There was confirmation of what he wanted to find out—the only hoof-prints were those of his own beast, but there were three distinct sets of foot-prints. One, with a small heel, told him that the wearer had a liking for Mexican footwear— Both heels left deep imprints on the outside; so did the narrow soles.

"Looks like he was bandy," Lannigan murmured.

There was nothing remarkable about the other prints, they had been made by men wearing ordinary boots. One set was bigger than the other, but not a giant's. They were just ordinary, and probably he would never be able to remember what they looked like, but it would be a long time before he forgot the imprint of those Mexican boots, worn by a man who was probably bow-legged. There was nothing rare in bow-legged men in Texas, but a bow-legged man who wore Mexican shoes did not appear every day.

The prints pointed towards the hills.

That did not mean that they had gone to Ridge City, for there were other places, mostly to the West, or North-west, towards the Mexican border. Outlaws would probably head that way, although there was no telling that the law in Ridge City was so particular that a bow-legged thief wearing Mexican high-heeled boots would be unwelcome. It was not likely that your credentials were examined closely in Ridge City.

He thought of the map.

It showed the trail and this water-hole, Ridge City, the Mexican and the New Mexico borders, indicating the Rio Grande with a splash of green. Even in his mind's eye that splash of green made him feel a little cooler. He was recalling everything on that map to mind, but he could not recall another water-hole even in the hills. There had been a name to them—*Desert Range,* and a

word in brackets next to it: barren. His eye seemed to travel to Ridge City. 'Cattle-township, 1,500.' That meant fifteen hundred people lived in Ridge City. But wait a minute. There were four main outfits which used Ridge City as their centre and one of them was south of the city, so it was the nearest point to where he was standing. Wherever there was an outfit, there was water.

That brought it down from fifty miles to forty-five, maybe, and even a little less.

He looked down at his feet. He was not a heap of bones yet, although he remembered the three heaps he had passed on the trail. That showed how seldom the trail was used, no one had thought it worth while to bury those bones.

He could reach the hills during the night, rest there, start out for Ridge City the next night, and—

That was the trouble; and what?

Lannigan began to smile. "Well, I'm not sun-crazy yet," he said aloud. "And they left me my rope. That's a curious thing, why didn't they take that?" He looked down at his belt and saw something that he already knew, but had not thought about; they had left him his knife, too, with its sheath; it was a good bowie knife. "Surely," he went on, "and they had kind hearts, I guess; they didn't cut my throat."

He went back to the first tree and sat down, without wasting time trying to get water then, although his mouth was already parched and he could not get the thought of a huge plateful of bacon and eggs out of his mind.

"Listen, Lannigan," he said, "yuh'll get food crazy if you go on that way. And yuh know the truth, don't yuh? Only a bigger fool than yuh are would go out on the trail tonight. People do use this trail. Maybe one a week, maybe once a month, but they use it. If yuh sit tight right here, someone will come along. Maybe yuh can ride behind him. Maybe it will be a stage coach, there are wheel marks in the trail. Yuh wait here. Yuh've got enough water, at nights, to keep yuh alive for a long time.

He stared at the water-hole for several minutes. The heat was so fierce now, that he felt as if he had been walking for hours, it affected his legs and his stomach and his eyes, even under the shade.

Slowly, he shook his head.

"Yuh never had patience enough, Lannigan," he said, "yuh know yuh won't be able to wait here. And if yuh wait two or three days, what's going to happen to yuh? Yuh'll get weak and yuh won't ever want to start out on the trail. That stage coach might not come for a month or more and if four people have been on this trail in twenty-four hours, that makes the odds that no one else will come for a long time. Yuh'll wait until sundown and then yuh'll move out. There's a moon, isn't there? Yuh can't lose the trail. By sundown the day after to-morrow yuh should reach that outfit. And dollars count there." He touched his roll, which he had been holding all the time, and tucked it away. "What was the name of that outfit?" he mused. "I ought to remember it, there was the name on the map. Now let me recall that name..."

He remembered several of the other names on the map, but not the one to the south of Ridge City. He worried himself for hours, concentrating on that one problem, but the comparative coolness of evening was already blessing the earth, and he had set out before he remembered it. Then he exclaimed aloud:

"That's it—*Arrowhead.*"

2

BENSON was strumming his guitar, which meant that he was happy and Tim Morely was about to get mad. Tim could stand the guitar for half an hour, but after that he always jumped

up from his seat and hurried off, without speaking. That happened every night when the crew of Arrowhead were at the ranch-house and not on the range.

To-night was no exception.

Half an hour exactly after Larry had started, and while the others were harmonizing, Tim jumped up. Larry's broad face broadened still further into a smile, but his stubby fingers did not stop moving. The Boy glanced over his shoulder, pretending that he was watching Tim, actually hoping that Marion Tandy would come out on to the verandah, to join her husband. She did not. The Boy sighed and turned back, his humming mechanical, his thoughts elsewhere.

Tim Morely reached the back of the ranch-house. It was a long, one storeyed building, much larger than the family needed, and shaped like a T. Only the faintest sound from the guitar and the singers reached the back. Tim leaned against a gate and took out his old oilskin tobacco bag and began to roll the makings. The moon was bright enough to show his wrinkled face and his drooping moustache. He looked what he was—out of temper with the world.

A door opened and he heard footsteps which everyone on Arrowhead recognized: Mrs. Tandy's. Tim's expression softened. He did not look round until she was only a yard or two from him, and then he turned and touched his forehead.

"Howdy, ma'am."

"Hallo, Tim," said Marion.

"Nice night," observed Tim, after a lengthy pause. "Cool, kind of."

"Cooler," said Marion. She was dressed in flimsy white gingham, and the slight wind stirred it and made it rustle. Tim did not like looking at Marion for long, it hurt; beauty often hurt, hers more than most, because he could never think of her without thinking, at the same time of Hiram Tandy who was on the verandah, smoking.

"Sure," said Tim. "Cooler."

"Tim—" she hesitated.

"Yeh?"

"Why do you always come to the back of the house at night?"

Tim smoothed his moustache and did not try to hide his scowl. "It's that noise, ma'am."

"Larry's guitar? Everyone else seemes to like it," Marion remarked.

"Sure, everyone else," Tim admitted. "I can't explain the way it works me up, ma'am, and maybe I'm an unreasonable old man who likes some quiet at night. Me, now, I'd rather read."

"Why don't you?"

"Well, in the first place, I ain't got no books," Tim told her, "and in the second place, I can't read all the words there would be in those books. There was a time when I was out at Double-C, ma'am, you wouldn't remember those days. Double-C was a good place to work when I was there, a long ways back. A very long ways." He took out his pipe and rubbed the back of his hand over his moustache. "I recollect those days well. There was Jem Grant and Mis' Grant and the boys. The way those boys behaved to me is no one's business. But those boys was fond've me, in their way, they was right fond've me, an' they did one thing they didn't realize I would remember right now, when only one of them's alive and the other had troubles enough of his own 'fore he died. D'yuh know young Jem Grant, ma'am?"

There was a moment's hesitation before Marion said: "I have met him, Tim."

"I feel right sorry for him," Tim said, "and yuh wouldn't believe there was a time when he an' his brother used to bring me their books for me to read when I wasn't out on the range. It's true, ma'am. There were pictures in those books and stories—I can remember those stories now. An' I could read all the words in those books. Nowadays—" he broke off and laughed. "I guess I'm too old to talk nonsense this way, ma'am."

"How old are you, Tim?"

Tim looked at her ruminatively. "Well, I guess I don't rightly know," he said, "but I could calculate. It isn't a thing I think about much, ma'am. I remember—why, sure I remember!" His voice brightened. "What year is it now, ma'am?"

"Eighteen-hundred and seventy-one," Marion answered, gravely.

"Then, ma'am, I'm sixty—sixty—sixty six," declared Tim, triumphantly. "Eighteen-O-five I was born, because that was the year the Grants arrived in Ridge County an' if yuh could looksee now you would find that date over the porch of the ranch-house. Sixty six," repeated Tim.

"That isn't so old."

"It's plenty old enough, ma'am. Why, there are times when I feel so old—"

HE STOPPED, abruptly.

Out of sight, sitting in a rocking-chair, listening to the guitar and the harmonizing, was Hiram Tandy. Tim did not know how old Tandy was, but probably he was older than he; or perhaps about the same age. And this girl, standing by his side, could not be more than twenty-three or four.

"Do you ever want to stop riding the range?" she asked.

"Times, yes," admitted Tim, glad of the new subject. "Times I wouldn't stop riding the range, ma'am. It's the autumn an' winter that worry me, I guess. Summer, I can ride with any man, but come Fall I begin to wish I didn't have t' sleep on the ground with only a blanket between me an' it." He gave a little laugh. "Cray was saying I was going soft, one day back. I guess he was right."

"He shouldn't have said that to you."

"Aw, ma'am, why not? He meant it as a joke."

"Does he ever joke?" asked Marion, slowly.

"Why, surely. Yuh've got to know him, ma'am, 'fore yuh can appreciate his jokes. I know a lot of folks don't take to Cray, but if I had to make a hard ride, there aren't many I'd rather have with me than him. No, ma'am, there's a lot of good things 'bout Cray that some folks don't appreciate."

"You're very loyal," said Marion.

"Loyal, ma'am? I doan know about that." Tim reflected before he went on. "No, I doan know about that," he repeated. "I've worked with Cray for close on twenty years. He ain't ever done me a mean trick. That's saying somethin' in twenty years."

"Yes," admitted Marion, "but—"

"Go on, ma'am," urged Tim.

"You still call him Cray?"

"It's his name," Tim answered. "One name's good as another. Everyone calls me Tim. There are times I forget I've got a second name. I guess there are times when he forgets he's got a first name. It's the way yuh're addressed when yuh first arrive in a place that sticks, ma'am. There's The Boy, now. I guess in ten—fifteen years time, they'll be calling him The Boy. He just won't think nothin' of it an' there's no reason why he should."

"I suppose not," said Marion.

They fell silent, both staring into the moonlit night.

She spoke again. "Thank you, Tim." She always said that. "Goodnight."

Tim touched his forehead. "Thank *yuh*, ma'am, I—"

HE BROKE off, for something moved not far from the gate. A coyote, perhaps; but they seldom came so near to the house. One of the dogs? They were all shut up, he had shut them up himself. And the ponies were in the corral. Anyone from Ridge City would use the other trail, and would approach the front of the ranch-house.

Marion asked sharply: "What is it, Tim?"

"I doan know," said Tim. "I thought—" he broke off again, and this time he was sure that something moved, close to the ground. "Did

yuh see that, ma'am?"

"No."

"Look there." He pointed, so that she could follow the direction of his gaze. At first all he could see was the dark ground, but suddenly there was movement: a dark shape raised from the ground was visible in the moonlight, then sank down again.

"It's a *man*," Tim snapped. "Ma'am, will yuh tell the others?"

He pushed the gate open and hurried out.

The ground was hard beneath his feet. There was little good rangeland near the ranch-house, and this had been a hotter, drier summer than most. He knew the trail beyond Arrowhead to Austin, and already he guessed accurately what he would find.

He found a man trying to move again. He put a hand on the man's back, for he was on his face and trying to crawl, and said gently: "Yuh stay quiet, stranger."

A sound that might have been words came from the man's lips. He collapsed, his face in his arms. Tim could feel his heavy breathing, his heaving shoulders. Gently, Tim moved his arms beneath the man and moved him, until he was on his back. His hat was on the back of his head, held by the straps. Tim took off his own coat, rolled it into a pillow, and pushed it under the man's head. Now he could see the face in the moonlight. It was a lined face, that of an old man. But all men who came this way from the Austin trail looked like old men by the time they reached Arrowhead or Ridge City.

He heard footsteps, and The Boy reached his side. "What's it, Tim?"

"A man in a bad way," Tim said. "Where's the others?"

"Cray's fetching water."

Cray would think of that. "An' Larry?"

"Arrangin' a bunk."

They had known what to expect, thought Tim. He knelt by the man's side, and felt his hands. They were thin but not too thin. He felt along the arm, gently. The flesh was firm, the man was not a living skeleton, such as generally came off the trail. And he had come by night. Most travellers were sun-mad by the time they reached Arrowhead, for they had not the sense to keep out of the sun every possible moment.

The Boy was staring down. This was the first stranger who had come into his ken this way, for he had been at the outfit only a few months. This was the first of the summer. Some summers there were three or four; Cray had often told him that.

Larry and Cray arrived. They moistened the man's cracked lips and let just a trickle of water flow into his mouth. He coughed, wracking his whole body.

"That's enough," said Tim.

They waited until the man had stopped, and then the two younger ones carried him, with Tim walking on one side and The Boy on the other. They went through the gateway but not towards the house; for Old Tandy did not allow such derelicts into the house; the bunk-house was good enough for them. He would see that they had food and warmth, but would not give them hospitality at his own table.

The back door was wide open. Tandy and Marion stood there, watching. "Is he—is he all right?" Marion called.

"Of course he's all right," came Tandy's gruff voice.

"He'll do, ma'am," called Tim. They had to turn away from the door in order to get to the bunk-house.

"Where are you going?" asked Marion, startled. "Bring him in here." This was her first experience of such visitors.

"No," said Tandy. "Take him to the bunk-house."

The men had not stopped, knowing what Tandy would say, and they disappeared round the end of the building. Tim, nearest the door, heard Marion speak in a startled voice, and heard Tandy's answer. The girl's voice altered after that.

She spoke in a tone which he had not heard before. Then Tandy's voice was raised, but Tim could not catch the words.

The light from the front door was spreading out when they reached the other side of the house, and the bunk-house was only a few yards in front of them, the door wide open. But before they reached it, Marion called out again, in that different harder voice: "Tim, bring him in here."

"But, ma'am—"

"At once," she said.

The four hands looked at one another, bewildered. Tandy had given an order; everyone obeyed Tandy; it was the kind of thing that had grown up; no one ever disobeyed him. But the tone of his wife's voice brooked no denial.

Tim said: "Well, ma'am—"

"Bring him." That was Tandy.

Cray said: "I guess she means it." He sounded doubtful.

"I guess she means it," said Larry Benson.

She came hurrying down the steps and reached them. She stood for a moment, looking at the man's face. His mouth was open, he had a thick, dust-covered stubble. His eyes were closed and he was gasping weakly for breath. He looked so old—older than Tim or Tandy. His clothes were thick with the dust of the trail and his hair was almost white with it, the dark patches showed through only here and there.

They took him into the ranch-house.

3

LANNIGAN woke up to the touch of soft hands, but did not immediately open his eyes. The light was too bright, and hurt them. But it was not really bright, he found, when at last he opened them for a moment, for the curtains were drawn. Lights at the sides told him that it was broad daylight.

Waking up was bringing him new experiences.

There was something he did not recognize at first, a smell—a scent. He looked down. He was covered only by a sheet, pure white. He thought less of that than of the scent. What was it? He recognized it as last; lavender. His lips curved in a smile. He turned his head into a soft pillow, and thought for a moment of the burning desert...

After a long time another movement disturbed him.

This time, he felt much better; and he remembered the room and the faint smell of lavender. He looked round. The door had opened and someone was bringing in a tray. A woman. She looked at him quickly, and when she saw that he was awake, she smiled. Lannigan stared at her, as if he could not believe his eyes. She wore a light green dress with huge shoulders and sleeves; her hair was in ringlets. She was a picture creature, not flesh and blood. But she carried a tray with a steaming bowl on it. She put the tray by the side of the bed and the lavender smell was gone, that of meat broth took its place, and he realized that he was hungry.

"Are you feeling well enough to eat?" she asked.

"Eat?" echoed Lannigan, in a husky voice. "I—why, s u r e l y ma'am." She was bending over him, touching the pillow. He put out his right hand and touched her wrist. She did not seem to notice that, but she was real, this wasn't a dream. He smiled again.

"Now, sit up," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." He put hands on the bed, to hoist himself up, but his elbows gave way, he hadn't the strength. With her help he sat up, but the moving exhausted him and he was surprised and ashamed of his own weakness.

She sat on the side of the bed and smiled at him. "Do you think you

can hold the bowl?"

"Why, surely, ma'am."

"Try," she said.

He took the bowl in one hand, but had she not steadied it, it would have fallen and the broth would have slopped on to the white sheet. He coloured, angrily. He tried again, kept it steady with one hand and took the spoon which she offered him with the other. One spoonful trembled up to his lips, touched them—and then the spoon slipped.

"Ma'am, I—"

"It's all right," she said. "I'll feed you."

Lannigan had a strange feeling as she took up the spoon and put it to his lips. It was strange enough to be fed, because he did not remember ever having been unable to feed himself; and he felt annoyed as well as a little ashamed, but there was something stranger: she *wanted* to do this, she was pleased. She did not speak, but allowed him to take his time. Two or three times he made himself swallow another spoonful and then she took the bowl away.

"You have had plenty," she told him.

"I guess you're right. Thank—thank yuh, ma'am."

"I am glad to help," she said, and stood up. "I expect you will go to sleep again. Do just what you wish. If you would like anything else, ring this bell." She touched a small hand-bell on the side of the table, picked up the tray and went out. "Rest and don't worry." she said.

The door closed. He heard a man's voice, followed by hers on a sharper note. He had not thought that she could sharpen her voice like that, because everything about her seemed soft and lovely, Soft and lovely. Lavender. . .

He dozed, but did not sleep. It was dream-like and very pleasant. He had lain flat again, but now he managed, slowly, to sit up. For the first time he looked properly about the room.

The wood walls were made of heavy, dark-stained timbers. The ceiling was of planed, yellow wood. There was a lamp on a table near the window, a small horse-hair stuffed chair, a dressing-table, a washstand with a marble top and jug and bowl. And, of course, the fan.

Now and again he turned and looked at the bell. Each time it was more difficult to resist the temptation to touch it, although he had no practical reason to. He felt so much at ease, he wanted nothing, only to see her; or perhaps to see her smile again.

He heard the man's voice in the ranch-house, gruff, that of an old man. It was her father perhaps. She spoke to the man in the harsh voice Lannigan had first noticed when she had left the room, but he could hear what was said.

He heard footsteps outside.

For the last hour he had been aware of sounds outside; horses champing, an occasional word from a man, the swilling sound of water being emptied, the lazy yap of a dog, sounds which might come from any household; but these footsteps were different. Whoever caused them was not walking normally, but very softly and slowly, a deliberated stealth which made Lannigan frown. He remembered how stealthy the men who had robbed him must have been.

A shadow fell upon the green reed blind.

LANNIGAN glanced at the table and the bell; but he was looking for something very different, a gun. He felt defenceless without one, knowing that he was too weak to take any action.

A hand touched the side of the blind. Next moment a man appeared, looking behind him, so that Lannigan saw only the Stetson and a red neck with some white hair. Here, then, was an older fellow. The man

turned with difficulty and his hat was pushed to one side, where it hit the blind. Lannigan was no longer alarmed, but amused. The face of the old man was a friendly one, too, although obviously he was on edge and nervous. Why should anyone mind being seen looking at him through the window? Had he been a woman, now—

"Yuh 'wake?" whispered the old man.

"Surely," said Lannigan.

The old man seemed surprised. He narrowed his eyes and peered across the room. He had grey moutaches which were swept down below his jowl on either side of his chin.

"Howdy?" asked Lannigan, willing to be friendly.

Tim Morely said: "Yuh well 'nough to be moved?"

"I guess, if I have to be moved."

"Yuh'll have to be moved." Tim said. "There's hell's bellowin' goin' on about yuh."

Lannigan thought he knew the trouble; the old man was not quite right in the head, it would be best to humour him.

"I'm sorry about that," he said.

"Not yuhr fault," admitted Tim Morely. "Sometime tonight, stranger, an' we'll see yuh safe enough. That clear?"

"Surely."

"Yuh're a sight more obligin' than I expected," said Tim Morely, looking relieved—so relieved that Lannigan began to wonder if his guess were wrong. The man seemed to know what he was saying, and to mean it. But why on earth should anyone want to move him, why should there be any need for it? And above all, why did the old man duck under the blind, leaving his shadow on it for a moment, and then disappear without another word?

He was gone; and Lannigan could not ask questions.

He heard footsteps in the house, and glanced at the door. They were quick, eager footsteps, those of the woman. She did not come in at once, but he was glad that she was near. He glanced at the window, and this time the shadow, which he thought he had imagined, moved. There was no doubt about it. Someone was standing there, on the verandah which, doubtless, ran the whole length of the front of the house.

The door opened, and he looked round with a start. "Why, hallo, ma'am?"

She was dressed differently, in something dark. It threw up the creaminess of her arms and shoulders, and seemed to give colour to her cheeks and brightness to her eyes. He no longer had any doubt that she was really beautiful— She stepped to the side of the bed and stood looking down, her eyes brimming over with laughter.

"How are you now?" she asked.

"Getting along," said Lannigan.

"Do you feel hungry?"

"Well, not exactly hungry," Lannigan said, "I'll 'llow I could eat a little if it was brought right here, but it wouldn't worry me none if I didn't eat for a while."

"Then you'd better not," she said.

"It's as yuh say, ma'am."

She laughed again. "Have you seen yourself?" she asked.

He was startled. "Not lately, ma'am."

She turned away, went to the dressing-table and picked up a mirror which he had not noticed. She brought it to him, waiting until she was standing in front of him before she turned the glass so that he could see it. He was shocked. A week-old stubble, hair much too long, deep lines at his eyes. And, just then, a startled expression which justified the little laugh she gave.

He closed his eyes in mock horror. "I've seen enough, ma'am."

"Do you want to grow a beard?" she asked.

"It wasn't my intention?"

"Then you're not—" she paused— "an outlaw?"

"What gave yuh that idea?" asked Lannigan, curiously.

"Most men are, I'm told, who get lost before they reach Arrowhead or Ridge City."

Arrowhead, of course! That was

the place, he could see it written clearly on the map. So he had reached his objective *and* kept his sanity. And he had met this girl.

"Well, I assure yuh that I'm not outlawed as far's I know," he said. "an' I don't know of any reason why I should be. I was just hitting the trail when I was held up—" it sounded much better to say that than to admit he had been robbed while asleep—"and robbed of my horse and 'most everything I possessed. I decided to walk, an' I haven't yet been able to thank yuh, ma'am, for—"

"I am glad to help," she said. She was still holding the mirror, and looking at him more thoughtfully. "That is the truth, isn't it?"

"Gospel truth, ma'am."

"Thank you," she said. She lowered her voice. "My husband is convinced that everyone who arrives on that trail is a dangerous man. Will you, please, do everything you can to make him understand that you—" she broke off.

"I think I can do that," Lannigan said. He thought: 'husband,' but he was not affected by the word himself, only by the way her lips tightened when she uttered it. The gaiety faded from her eyes, and she looked much older. She continued to stare at him, but suddenly relaxed and held up the mirror again.

"You will have to be shaved," she declared.

"I'll be well 'nough to do that myself, too," declared Lannigan, hastily.

"I'll send in one of the men, if you would like it."

"I would much prefer to wait," insisted Lannigan.

"Not too long, please!" she said.

She went out again, but returned very soon with bread-and-butter, cut wafer thin; there was not much of it, but it seemed to melt in his mouth and he felt much better after it. He was certainly strong enough to wonder what was wrong; something undoubtedly, probably an age-old situation—a woman who did not like her husband. He frowned. It was too bad, if that girl—

THERE WAS A shout inside the house, and it came from the room behind him. He could not hear the words. Next moment, the girl spoke, in a voice more high-pitched than usual. If only he could hear what was being said. Her voice, with its razor edge, a man's, so gruff and old, both of them raised in a quarrel that seemed to go on and on interminably. The words were still confused, they were mixed up now, both man and woman were shouting together.

A door slammed and the voices stopped.

He lay back on his pillows, exhausted by nervous tension, but no longer easy in his mind. The story was getting clearer. He was not wanted here. The man was fiercely jealous, she insisting on nursing him. There was the old man at the window who had said so decidedly that he would have to leave: that was now understandable enough.

Nothing happened for a while.

The ordinary sounds of the daily round of the ranch-house went on outside. It grew warmer for a while, and then markedly cooler. Already, he realized that the house was built so that this room faced nearly north. The sun was away from it; and it was getting dark. Sundown. The old man with the long moustaches had hinted that after sundown 'they' would be here.

There were hoofbeats outside. One horse was moving away from the ranch-house. Then he heard a voice: "Aren't yuh goin', ma'am?" It was the old man of the window speaking to her.

"No, Tim."

"Ma'am—are yuh sure yuh're wise?"

"I'm not going, Tim," she said.

Tim seemed nonplussed. Lannigan put meaning into the words: The husband had ridden out, perhaps the quarrel had been about a call they had to make. She should have gone with him but had decided not to.

and that worried Tim. He warmed to Tim; the man was quite right, she was foolish to allow anything to come between herself and her husband.

He said in a whisper: "Careful, Lannigan, careful. And the quicker yuh're out of here the better. Maybe there will be some real trouble if yuh're not careful."

The old man was speaking again, pleading. She ought to go. He was old enough to advise her; he meant no offence; but it could easily be misunderstood if she stayed behind. He spoke in simple, halting words, making his meaning only too clear.

He did not hear what she said, but there was a brighter note in the old man's voice: "Sure, ma'am, sure—he doesn't ride fast. Larry or me will come with yuh as far as—" a door closed and the voices were cut off. Lannigan turned and looked at the bell.

Hoofbeats sounded again, two horses this time; they went off at a canter which became a gallop while they were within earshot of the house. Lannigan laughed, stretched out his hand and lifted the bell. He held it for a moment, and then shook it. It gave a clear, loud sound. He rang it twice, then put it down.

"What's that?" asked a high-pitched voice.

"It came from the house," another man said, gruffly.

"Is it him?"

"Maybe. I'll go see." There were heavy footsteps in the yard outside, then boards creaked and suddenly the blind moved. It was not yet dark enough to hide the man entirely, but Lannigan could only guess what he looked like as he stood framed in the window. "Yuh callin'?" he asked.

"It—no, it was an accident," Lannigan said.

"I shouldn't allow accidents," said the man with the deep voice. He stood there for a moment, then climbed into the room. His movements were slow and deliberate, his tread heavy. Lannigan saw that he had guns at both hips. His stockiness and breadth of shoulders became more apparent as he reached the bed and looked down. At closer quarters, Lannigan could see his heavy features; he had a curious impression that this man did not know how to smile.

"I shouldn't allow accidents," he repeated, heavily, "How are yuh now?"

"Improvin'."

"Can yuh sit in the saddle?"

"I could if I had a saddle an' a horse to go with it."

"I'll be back," said the heavily-built man, and turned away.

It was odd that he went out through the window, instead of the door. Lannigan lay back, sweating. He had not enjoyed that few moments of conversation with a man who was physically so powerful.

He seemed to be there for a long time, in gathering darkness. Soon he could see nothing. The sounds were fewer, and he could hear no voices. He tried to get up. He succeeded in sitting, but he could not get out of bed. When he dropped back, he was exhausted. They would have to tie him to the saddle if they wanted him to ride, but—why did they want him to ride?

He was a fool! They had received instructions from the man, of course, from the husband. Tim had persuaded the girl to leave the ranch-house, so that he could be removed without her knowledge, but—where would they take him? And what could he do to help himself?

4

THERE were clearer sounds outside, soon, and Lannigan saw lights shining from windows—of a bunkhouse, he imagined. Then a rider returned, the hoofbeats growing louder until they stopped nearby. Soon afterwards, several men walked towards the house. He heard them walk up the

steps, and then into the room behind him. The door opened, and a dim light shone through. One man, little more than a boy, came in carrying a lantern. The others followed. There was something sinister and unreal about it, but Lannigan could not help himself and did not try to speak.

He recognized the old man of the window.

"Stranger, we are all sorry about this," said Tim, "an' we'll explain shortly, I guess, but just now yuh've got to give yuhr mind to gettin' out've here. Do yuh follow?"

"I guess I'll have to follow," said Lannigan.

"We mean yuh no harm. Yuh aren't goin' to enjoy the next half-hour, I guess, but yuh're not so sick yuh can't stand it."

Lannigan said nothing.

"Can yuh dress yuhrself?" asked Tim.

Lannigan said: "I can try."

He put on his shirt, but it was all he could do; his weakness angered him, and he struggled and spent himself trying. Then the old man and the boy helped him, and two others—Cray, one was called, the other Larry—carried him between them out of the house. Horses were waiting. They had changed their minds about letting him ride on himself. He was helped astride the horse on which the old man was sitting. Then, with the dark-featured man, they started off.

Tim had been right; riding was agony. Lannigan's bones seemed to crack and his flesh to tear, but he gritted his teeth. He could not have sat there without support from the old man, who seemed to guess which way he was going to fall, and always had an arm there, to support him.

Where were they going?

He became aware of lights which were different from the moon and the stars. Yellow glims, which were coming from houses; they were on a crest of a hill, and he was looking down into the town. So this was Ridge City. If the agony of his body would let him, he would laugh; he had chosen this place on a map because it seemed so far from everywhere, for no other reason in the world, and—

"It won't be long," Tim said.

Lannigan muttered: "Thanks."

"Can yuh hear what I say?"

The blood pounding through Lannigan's ears made it difficult, but he could just hear.

"Surely."

"Then listen. We'll see yuh all right. But don't return to Arrowhead. That would be dangerous for yuh. Don't return. Yuh understand that?"

"I—guess. But—"

"Stranger, I'm not good at answering questions," Tim said. "I don't know all the answers. But I know Tandy isn't a man to cross, an' yuh've crossed him plenty. Maybe it wasn't yuhr fault. That makes no difference. Keep out've Tandy's way and don't return to Arrowhead. Is that clear?"

Lannigan whispered: "Yes, that's clear."

The other man spoke. "Remember it," he growled.

Soon they left the main trail, which was then a road running between houses spread out at varying intervals, and went up a side street. They stopped outside a large, single-storey shack. There were lights at two windows. Tim Morley climbed out of the saddle, and Lannigan swayed; the other man helped him to keep his balance. Tim went up to the house and knocked. A woman answered the door, her voice and Tim's mingled, and one word registered on Lannigan's mind: *"Doc."* Had they brought him to a doctor? A man's voice called out, from inside the shack, and soon he was being carried from the horse into the building.

He had a bleared vision of a short, fat man and a tall woman, before he was put on a small bed in a room only just big enough to hold a bed and chair. He knew there was a picture on the wall by the side of the bed, that was all. The door closed. Voices came in as if from far away.

Men walked out, saddles creaked, horses moved again—that same circle of events, like a bad dream. Just a

dream; perhaps it was a nightmare. He grew sense. There was music somewhere not far off and the sound of drunken men singing; one could always tell when singers were drunk. This was normal, it was what might be expected of a cattle township.

THE DOOR opened and the fat man entered. He carried a candle and put it on a bracket in the wall. He was so short that it made him look fatter than he was. He turned to Lannigan and smiled, a cheerful, pleasing smile. "Well, son, how yuh feeling?"

"I'm not complaining."

"Aren't yuh, then?" The fat man looked surprised as he sat on the side of the bed. "A lot of men would complain plenty if they'd been through what you have. When did you last eat?"

Lannigan tried to think. "Way back," he said. "Before sundown. But I'm not hungry."

"If yuh don't eat yuh won't get on those legs of yuh'rs soon enough," said the fat man. "I'll have Hannah send something in for yuh. I just wanted to say this. Yuh're to stay right here until yuh're able to get about well enough to look after yuhrself. I'm Jordan, Doctor Jordan, Hannah's my sister and Beulah is something of everything, I guess. Yuh won't be worried bv anyone or anything else."

"Yuh're mighty good."

Jordan waved his hand. "There's one thing I'm curious about," he said. "When did yuh leave Austin? Yuh came from Austin, didn't yuh?"

"Yes. It seems about a hundred years ago," Lannigan said. He frowned, concentrating. "It was Monday."

"Which Monday?"

"Yuh wouldn't joke with me," reproached Lannigan.

"I'm not joking. Today's Wednesday."

Lannigan stared. "Wednesday," he repeated. "So that means I've been on the trail—" his voice tapered off.

"For a week or more, I guess," said Jordan. "And yuh've had more than a little time in the sun. Yuh ought to be dead, or worse." He gave a gentle little laugh. "I'll have that food sent in."

When he had gone, Lannigan felt easier in his mind, although he could not really grasp one fact: he had been a week on the trail. That fully explained his weakness and his helplessness, it made him feel ashamed. Jordan had said exactly the right thing; he would not need to move out again until he could use his legs and his head.

Beulah was a high yellow negress with a flashing smile, dressed in black, trimmed with crinkly white and with a little cap on her head. She brought in the tray and helped him sit up. Bread, butter, a boiled egg—he was grateful when she fed him, and found that she had brought more than enough.

* * *

Lannigan counted the days. Three before Jordan would let him get out of bed to sit in a tiny chair while the bed was made. Five before he could stand his own weight. Seven before he was allowed to step into the room where Jordan and his sister lived; it was a large, comfortable room. Jordan pointed out his surgery door and the door of a room where the patients waited. There were three other bedrooms, approached by a narrow passage.

After the seventh day he made real progress. It was notable after two things: he borrowed scissors and a razor, first cut then shaved off his beard. Beneath it, his skin was pale and yellowish; the deep tan had gone. Even his forehead was affected. Beulah grinned and laughed when she saw the beard gone, and Jordan looked genuinely startled when he saw Lannigan without it. Hannah Jordan, who saw surprisingly little of him, did not appear to notice it. She acted as if she had something always on her mind, but she was not unfriendly.

The second notable thing was that he looked out of a window and could see part of Ridge City. He could just see the Main Street, at the end of the road where the Jordan's lived. He pulled up a chair and sat watching. Riders, men and women on foot, many

children—there was a surprising number of children for a cattle town, he thought, and that spelt prosperity.

Hannah Jordan was sitting by the next window. "Is that the first stage that's passed since I arrived, ma'am?"

"It's the first in five or six weeks," she told him.

Lannigan grinned. So he had been right not to stay by the water-hole.

Two days later he went out into the streets. He choose early morning, on Jordan's instructions. It was hot but not yet too hot and the night had laid the dust. He did not want to stay too long, but he saw all there was worth seeing of Ridge City. It created a favourable impression. Most of the buildings were solid, some were of brick or stone. There were three banks, another sign of prosperity. Gay-striped awnings covered the windows and doors of the stores, and there were plenty of stores. One saloon, of two storeys, boasted the name Hotel—*Ridge City Hotel.* Two black porters were working with a will outside, cleaning the steps and the windows, freshening it for another day's defence against the sun. Blistered paintwork and bare patches of wood gave silent testimony of that constant battle. But there were plenty of water-troughs for horses, always under a tree for shade, and in the shops were bowls for dogs. Lannigan did not know why he was surprised that Ridge City seemed so flourishing and modern.

A few people stared at him curiously, but seemed to take no special interest in him. He would have been fully satisfied and contented but for a sight that met his eyes just before he turned back into the side-street and Doc Jordan's. The sight was a horse. A small roan, badly brushed, twitching ears and tail, and a myriad flies. There was something about the look of the horse that gave a good impression, one of staying power. Lannigan knew better; it had no such power, but it had cost him fifty dollars in Austin.

He did not go right up to it, but studied the saddle. That was not his, but he had no doubt about the identity of the horse. It was tied outside a small saloon, and he went to the window and looked in. Only a few people were there. It was a long narrow room, with a bar all along one side, glistening with bottles, a yawning bar-keep at the far end, a few tables at which men were eating. None of them looked as if they wore Mexican boots. He felt the heat of the sun increasing, but waited about. The door opened and three men came out together, two to walk off, the third to approach the horse. He was a tall man with a long, leathery face, droll-looking lips and wearing boots that had certainly not come from Mexico. Nor was he bowlegged. He stood with his head on one side, contemplating the horse. Then he sighed.

LANNIGAN stepped forward. "Howdy, stranger?"

The tall man turned to look at him. "Howdy."

"May I ask one question of yuh?" inquired Lannigan.

"I doan guarantee no answer."

"That's understood. Did yuh buy that horse in Ridge City?"

The tall man looked at him ruminatively, and after a long pause, he said: "What horse?"

Lannigan stared at him, not allowing himself to look at the horse. *"What horse?"* Was that one way of telling him not to interfere with other people's business? The glow in the tall man's eyes suggested that it was something different and Lannigan thought he ought to know what it was. The other did not look away from him.

Then the truth dawned on Lannigan. He laughed. "I mean that apology for a horse," he amended.

"I'll allow that," conceded the tall man, and looked at the sorry beast: "Yes, sir I bought that horse in Ridge City. Yuh doan want to buy a horse, I reckon?"

"Not if that's the kind they sell."

"It's the kind I bought," said the tall man. "Yuh got a special reason for asking?"

"Yes."

"Stranger, I've got to be on my

way," said the tall man. "but I'll be back. In three-four days, after sundown. If yuh've still got a special reason for asking, I wouldn't object to yuh buying me a shot of rye at Tandy's."

Lannigan frowned. "Tandy's? But that—"

"Tandy's saloon," the tall man said. "I'll be seeing yuh, maybe." He forked leather, turned, touched his hat and made off.

So there was a saloon called Tandy's in Ridge City, reflected Lannigan. He had not seen it. He walked slowly towards Doc Jordan's, hoping that he would be able to talk with the fat man, but Jordan had been called out. Hannah was also out, shopping. Beulah beat about the house with an orderly frenzy which drove Lannigan into his tiny bedroom. But he could not settle. He felt much better, and had now to come to grips with his problem. He still had two hundred dollars, but nothing else in the world, except his clothes—and only one lot of clothes. They had been washed and pressed for him, and he was conscious of their newness; but he needed more shirts, kerchiefs, many other things. He even needed a razor. He must buy a Colt too—he reckoned that when he had bought everything he needed, he might have twenty dollars left.

"So I also need a job," he declared aloud.

Soon afterwards, Jordan came in. Beulah had retired to whip the kitchen with her frenzy, and the two men met in the large room. Jordan had come back from the trail, Lannigan saw. He looked unusually serious.

Lannigan said: "Yuh're looking tired?"

Jordan laughed. "Tired? I'm worried, Lannigan."

"I'm sorry about that."

"So you should be. I'm worried about yuh."

Lannigan said nothing, but looked at him evenly.

"What have you got in yuhr mind to do?" asked Jordan.

"Work," said Lannigan.

"In Ridge City or around?"

"One of the outfits, I hope."

Slowly, Jordan shook his head. "I don't advise it," he said. "I'm serious about that, Lannigan; I don't advise yuh to work in a Ridge City outfit or anywhere in this country. It oughtn't to be that way, but it is."

"Aren't yuh being somewhat mysterious?" asked Lannigan.

"Yuh're strange to the county," Jordan said, and it dawned on Lannigan then, that the doctor was being discursive because he did not feel happy about what he felt he had to say. "Yuh don't know Tandy or Tandy's strength. I wouldn't say that Tandy's bad, but he's been used to having his own way so long he gets mad when someone goes against him. He's mighty mad about yuh."

Lannigan did not speak, and Jordan wiped the sweat on his forehead. "Tim Morely told me more or less what happened when they brought yuh here," Jordan went on. "Yuh ought to know this, Lannigan. Marion Tandy is just about the biggest prize Tandy ever won. Tandy started out when he was a boy to go places. He was born in Ridge City. He was born poor, too, and now he's the wealthiest man in the county. I wouldn't like to say how much he's worth. He owns half of the township and three of the five ranges. He wants a thing and he gets it. He wanted a young wife, and when he met Marion he decided she was to be his wife. No one who knew her reckoned he had a chance, but he won in that, too. Or he thought he did."

"Now, listen, Lannigan, I'm not talking for the sake of talking. I'm telling yuh the truth. Tandy is a mean *hombre;* he's jealous. He never liked it if someone opened a new store or brought in some goods from Austin before he did. And more men have spent time in jail and afterwards been ridden out of Ridge City for helping himself to ten cents from Tandy's store than I can say. When Tandy owns a thing, it's his, and the man who touches it is liable to get into trouble. I'm not blaming yuh. I'm not blaming anyone, but Tandy is more jealous of his wife than of

anything he possesses, and she showed favour to yuh. Maybe yuh think he ought to take it out on her. Maybe he will, but I shouldn't worry about that side of it if I were yuh. I would worry about yuhr side. Tandy won't be satisfied until he's driven yuh out of Ridge. And that's a fact Lannigan."

Lannigan said: "I don't know that I like the sound of Tandy."

"Yuh're not alone in that. But no one has ever been able to fight Tandy. Lately, no one much seems to have tried. Yuh've walked around the town, I guess. Yuh've seen the three banks, the hotel, the saloons—all there is to see. They belong to Tandy. Once, there were three different bankers in Ridge, now there's one—Hiram Tandy. He has managers and they do what he tells them. Tandy *is* Ridge City. But don't get me wrong," Jordan went on, "Tandy's mean, but he's done well by the town. Yuh've only got to keep yuhr eyes open to see that. It's a good town. It's prosperous because Tandy's prosperous. Tandy isn't so mean with his money, I don't figure he's that kind of mean." Jordan laughed, a little nervously, perhaps because he did not like the steady gaze from Lannigan's eyes. "But he's a mean *hombre*. I think yuh've hurt him pretty deep, and he'll hurt back. That's my opinion. I've confirmed it this morning. I've been out to Arrowhead. Tandy lives there because he was born in one of the bunk-houses. Tim Morely and Clay are of the same mind as me. Some men would be gunning for yuh, but Tandy doesn't fight like that. But if I were yuh, I wouldn't stay in Ridge City."

5

LANNIGAN did not say much after Jordan had finished, and Jordan advised him to think about the situation. Lannigan agreed that he would. He thought for two days. At the end of those two days he had come to one obvious conclusion. If Tandy were as important and powerful as Jordan said, then the doctor was taking a chance in letting him stay there. And he wasn't paying for his keep; it was time he did that, and moved out. The last two days had made a lot of difference to him. The last traces of weakness had gone, he had never been more fit. There was nothing to stop him from riding out, because between here and the next towns the country was less parched, there were no more stretches of unending desert.

He turned the situation over in his mind.

He did not like being driven out of a town on anyone's say so, and it angered him that Tandy should have such influence. But Tandy was a big man to fight, and as there seemed nothing but a matter of personal vanity to fight on, Lannigan wondered if it were worth while. Only stubbornness made him want to stay on.

Stubbornness—and, perhaps, a pair of bright eyes.

He went out early on the third day. He visited two or three stores and bought what he needed, except a saddle and a horse. The last time he had been forced to buy a horse, he thought ruefully, he had owned a saddle. Saddle and horse were going to make a mighty big hole in his roll. He went to look at the stables and liked nothing of what he saw there. He made his way back to the doctor's house, and found Jordan in his surgery.

"Howdy, Lannigan."

"Howdy, Doc. I've been figuring."

"What's the result of it?"

"I just have to get hire for a while," Lannigan said. "If yuh were fixed that way, where would yuh go for it?"

"Double-C," said Jordan, promptly. "Jem Grant's outfit. It's the furthest north. Yuh don't have to come in Ridge City; there's a small township almost as near to the north. It's on the edge of the county; Tandy doesn't own it, and hasn't lent money on it, as far's I know. And I think they could use a man."

"It sounds swell."

"I wouldn't put it that high," Jordan said, "Grant doesn't pay big wages; he can't afford it. But he'll provide a horse and saddle and let yuh pay for them out of yuh wages. That would help yuh, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would."

"I guess yuh'd better try Double-C," decided Jordan. "I still wish yuh could ride out of the county, but if that's the way it is, there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's the way it is," Lannigan said. "Doc, there's one thing I've been wanting to say for some time, but it's taken me days to get around to it. Thanks."

Jordan waved his hand, as if embarrassed. "Forget it, Lannigan."

"An' I owe yuh how much?"

"Yuh owe me nothing."

"While I owe yuh anything," Lannigan said, "I can't ride out of Ridge County."

Jordan leaned forward. "Lannigan, I'm glad to help; I'm always glad to help a man I like. Yuh've been my guest." He frowned, but there was a little smile in his eyes. "I owe yuh something. I don't like Tandy so much. I like it when he gets upset, forget it, Lannigan."

"If that's the way it is," said Lannigan, with a smile, "I'll forget it—one way."

"If I were yuh, I would hit the Double-C trail about three o'clock," Jordan told him. "I can lend yuh a horse; it'll be glad to have a man instead of a ball of fat on his back. If Grant hires yuh, he'll see I get the horse back, yuh won't have to worry. After three o'clock, the sun doesn't hit the first part of the trail so hard, yuh won't find it too hot. Take some advice, Lannigan. Go easy in the sun all've this summer. *All* of it. Yuh've come through well, but another dose of sun might put yuh so far back you couldn't come through at all."

"I'll remember that," said Lannigan.

HE HIT THE Double-C trail at three o'clock, and soon found that there was a tree-topped ridge to the south-west, which kept off the fiercest rays of the sun. On the north side the rangeland spread, dry but good enough for cattle, and a few beeves were there. One came close and he bent down out of the saddle and saw the brand—Cross-K. Then he rode for a long time, seeing no cattle except in the distance. The ridge grew higher and the trail itself was in shade, with the great wall of rock rising sheer from it on the one side, still topped with trees. The country was more broken. He forded a stream, where the water was fetlock deep, and crystal clear. He contrasted it with the country over which he had ridden when coming to Ridge City, and he understood more clearly the reason for the prosperity in the county.

Why, then, could Grant not afford to pay good wages?

He gave that problem little thought. As he rode on and darkness began to fall, he recalled that Jordan had said that Double-C was on the edge of the county. It was a mighty big county. He did not ride fast, as he wanted to keep himself fresh, and, a little while before full darkness, he rested for a while. He stayed long enough to walk and stretch himself under the heavy leaves of oaks that were fresh and green out here. The ground gave beneath his feet. There was no water in sight, but he suspected there was an underground stream running close to the trail here.

"I'll get on, I guess," he said aloud, and forked leather. It hurt a little, for he had got stiff from the unaccustomed riding. He rode out of the trees, looking at the trail. It forked just past here, Jordan had told him, and he wanted the right-hand fork. He found it. The trail was well-beaten, so Double-C riders often came this way. He—

Crack!

The bark of a rifle-shot sounded loud and close-by, startling him and his horse, which reared. "Steady," soothed Lannigan, and his hand dropped to his gun.

Crack!

Lannigan had been in too much fighting not to know when a gun was fired near him. And he knew what the

whirring sound of a bullet close by his head sounded like.

"They're after *me*!" he muttered.

With a horse which knew him, he would have had no anxiety. But this horse was gun-shy, trembling now, and might rear again. What he needed was speed, but he did not want the horse to bolt.

Crack! The third bullet struck a tree near him, he heard the dull sound as it entered it.

"Come on!" he said, aloud, and kneed his horse. It seemed eager, and shot ahead. But as its hoofs thundered on the trail, half-a-dozen shots rang out, all aimed towards him. To his right he saw the little flashes—three, in all; so there were three men on his right and at least another two behind him or on the left, and they wanted to stop him from getting through.

The horse was moving fast now.

He was not left long in doubt. Hoofbeats thundered, and although the shooting stopped he knew that he had little lead on the men who were after him. This was no time for asking himself questions, only for getting away. Not knowing the country, everything was against him, and those men were obviously out to kill. He kneed his horse again. It was breathing hard. Who could imagine Doc Jordan having a horse which could gallop for long? There seemed little chance of escaping. He gritted his teeth, urged the horse on, and became conscious of the drumming sound of the pursuit. Now and again a shot was loosed off at him, but none touched him. He did not think the others were getting appreciably nearer, they too were poorly-mounted, it seemed.

There was another fusilade of shots. After that the only sound he could hear came from his own horse. He sat erect, listening intently. The pursuit had stopped, there was no doubt about that.

He let his horse slow down. It was still breathing heavily, flanks heaving, and could not have maintained speed for much longer.

There was one great disadvantage: he had lost the trail. He was heading in the right direction, for the stars guided him, but the trail was way over on the left—the south. He tried to find it, but there was no moon now, and he did not strike it for a long time. He did come across a stream and a cluster of trees. He consulted the stars. It was getting late, and he was not sure that he could find Double-C that night, and the wise thing would be to roll himself up in his blanket and sleep until sun-up. Jordan had seen that he carried enough food. He would have made a fire to heat coffee, but for the fear of attracting the men who had attacked him.

As he curled himself up, he laughed, remembering the last time he had done this.

HE WOKE up, stiff but fresh-eyed. The horse was standing not far away, gazing at him as if thoughtfully. By the early morning light, he could see the beauty of the country, undulating green-covered, as if it had succeeded in defying the sun. The little cluster of trees was pleasant, the stream was clear and cold. He washed and ate, while the horse cropped at lush grass. Then, before the morning heat had risen, he started on his way. It took him half an hour to find the trail, and he had no doubt that it led to Double-C. There were some beeves about—not many, but enough to show him that they were good cattle, mostly Jerseys. The Double-C brand was on them all.

He rode up one of the gentle slopes and, from the top, looked down into a wide valley. Here were the real beeves of Double-C, masses of them. There was every appearance of a prosperous outfit, yet it could not 'afford' to pay well.

He saw the ranch-house. It looked tiny in the distance, but there were eight or nine buildings. He rode more quickly, his early stiffness gone. Soon he was within hailing distance of the ranch-house, and he could see two or three men near the corral, where at least two dozen horses were gathered. Horses, corraled, in the summer?

A man came walking towards him.

He thought he recognized him, but dismissed that thought as absurd until he recalled the long-faced man who admitted having bought his horse, and said that he patronized Tandy's saloon. The man did not smile, but recognition was obviously mutual.

Lannigan pulled up. The long-faced man said: "Yuh lookin' for me or for hire?"

"Hire."

"Yuh're hired," said the other, calmly.

Lannigan gave himself no time to show surprise. "Thanks," he said, laconically, and the tall man grinned.

"Yuh're welcome. Question is, how long yuh'll stay."

Lannigan got out of the saddle and they walked towards the ranch-house. A big man came to the door of the main building, big and good-looking, middle-aged and worried, Lannigan thought.

"Jem, we've got another hand," called out the long-faced man.

So the worried-looking man was Jem Grant.

"Who is it?" asked Grant.

"Name of Lannigan."

Grant's face cleared. "That's okay," he said. "Fix him up." He nodded to Lannigan, who thought that if it were not for the anxiety Grant would make a remarkably good impression. Grant went towards the corral, where other men were walking.

"Yuh work fast here," he observed.

"Sometimes," admitted the other.

"How did yuh know who I was?"

"Didn't we meet?" asked the other, and grinned. "My name's Paterson. Long Pat, for short, I'm sorry I bought yuhr horse, but yuh couldn't blame me for it. I'll tell yuh about that, some day."

"Yuh won't," said Lannigan.

"Meaning?"

"Yuh'll tell me now."

LONG PAT looked at him his head on one side, and then said slowly: "Yuh're the Lannigan who was with Doc Jordan for a while, an' before that yuh were at Arrowhead an' yuh annoyed Tandy which is a good recommendation for anyone who wants hire at Double-C. Jordan told me a little about yuh, the rest of the town told me a lot more. Maybe yuh didn't know it, but there was a lot of interest in yuh in Ridge City. Things get around pretty fast. And The Boy came in from Arrowhead and got lit up. He told us some more. One way'n the other, yuh're a character around here."

"Yuh can't blame me," Lannigan said.

"Who wants to blame yuh?" Long Pat was leading the way to a bunk-house. It was large and comfortable, but half of the twenty bunks were obviously not in use. By the others were the little things a cow-hand needed. Each had a small mirror, a towel, soap, razor. Three big kerosene lamps swung from the ceiling and there were two or three candles by some of the bunks. "No one in Double-C will blame yuh, I guess. Yuh can have the whole of this side to yuhrself," Long Pat finished.

"Thanks," said Lannigan.

"That's okay." Long Pat pushed his hat back and sat on the edge of a bunk. "Maybe yuh'd better know some more," he reflected. "The whole've yuhr story is known to us and to Ridge City, I've made that clear. There are those who think yuh lied and think there was more between yuh'n Marion Tandy than yuh've said, an there are others who think yuh've told the whole truth. Jordan's word is good enough for all've us here."

"I'm beginning to understand," said Lannigan.

"Yuh haven't heard the half. There's trouble this side of the range. Some rustling. Not much, but enough to get us worried. We can't properly figure it out. It makes no sense. There are a lot of the rustlers, not *just* two-three. They don't rustle enough cattle for their numbers. Seems like to Jem and me—I'm his foreman—they aren't really trying. We've asked ourselves why."

"Ridge is a good place for questions," Lannigan said.

"Yuh've learned that," smiled Long Pat. "Yuh don't know any answers, I hope?"

"Not yet," said Lannigan, "What

does the Sheriff say about this rustling?"

"We don't yet know," Long Pat said, "nor does he. We can handle our own troubles in Double-C. The sheriff is a Tandy man, and we've got no time for them."

Jordan had told Lannigan nothing of the feud which obviously existed between Jem Grant and Old Tandy, but it was obvious that he had recommended the outfit to him because of that feud. Lannigan thought it best to make no comment at this stage. Long Pat readily agreed to have Jordan's horse returned the next time anyone was going into Ridge City. Then he gave Lannigan the choice of six ponies, all good-looking beasts. Lannigan fancied a piebald, liking its haunches.

"Yuh're right about him," said Long Pat, "he comes from a good sire. An' dam, for that matter." He was handling Jordan's saddle as he spoke, and suddenly his eyes narrowed. His fingers touched something and Lannigan saw that a bullet had scored a grove across the saddle, only an inch or two from where he had been sitting. Obviously it was a fresh mark.

Long Pat said slowly; "I don't hold with asking too many questions, Lannigan, but—"

"That happened last night," said Lannigan.

"I see." Long Pat waited until the story was told, and then nodded. "It's happened before. There were five-six men, yuh say?"

"All of those."

"And just about the same part of the trail," said Long Pat.

"Last night it seemed to me as if they were protecting a part of the trail," said Lannigan, and explained: "They let me get through the trees and then fired. It was just before the trail forked. After I took the right fork, they came after me for a while, but they didn't seem to worry much. I wonder what would have happened if I'd chosen the left-hand fork."

"That's interestin'," said Long Pat, ruminatively. "I'll tell Jem."

"It's a fact that they didn't particularly want to get me when they saw the way I was going. They could have done easily," Lannigan declared. "I think you can take that for gospel. Me, I'm interested in that left-hand fork. What's there?"

"Nothing," said Long Pat. "That is, nothing for ten-twelve miles, where it reaches Ridge Falls. The river's big out there. There's no outfit in the hilly country, there aren't any nestlers, no mine workings—nothing I know of."

"When were you last there?"

"Spring," said Long Pat.

"There hasn't been much time for anything to get put there," allowed Lannigan. "How long has this trouble been brewing?"

"Two-three m o n t h s?" answered Long Pat, promptly. "It hasn't been what yuh would call serious, but it's been worrying." He shrugged his shoulders. "And two-three of our riders have quit. They don't like the situation. That's how it comes we're in need of men. Yuh don't know any more who want hire, do yuh?"

"Not this side of Austin."

"Let's say yuh don't know any more," said Long Pat.

LANNIGAN spent the day near the ranch-house. He met Jem Grant again, and his liking for the rancher was confirmed, although he had a feeling that Grant was more worried than Long Pat had admitted. He also met five other riders. The outfit was normally fifteen strong, Long Pat told him, but was now down to eleven. The rest of the riders were out on the range, keeping their eyes open for anything suspicious. There wasn't so much work to do. Branding was over, normally they would have waited until the Fall, which wasn't so far off now, and then herded the cattle on to the more sheltered ranges near the ridge. As that was where the trouble seemed to be brewing, they could not make a start yet.

Lannigan was convinced that all of the Double-C men were worried. Long Pat showed it less than any of them, and he formed a quick liking for the foreman, a liking which he thought was mutual. He was still not satisfied with the situation, but reckoned that by the end of a week he

might know much more about Ridge County.

Towards sundown, there was a call from outside. Lannigan was with Long Pat in a bunk-house, eating. The food was good.

"What's that?" asked Long Pat.

"Maybe they're the new hired men," Long Pat said, with a grin, "although they don't know it yet." He finished eating and went outside. By then the hoofbeats were audible to everyone. The tension, which had been noticeable before, increased. These four men were trigger-nervous. Lannigan did not like it, it was unhealthy.

Grant joined them as the four riders drew near. Because of the dusk, it was impossible to see them clearly, and the tension increased still further. Then one of the men called out with obvious relief: "It's the sheriff."

Long Pat said: "Gol'darn it, what's he doin' out here?"

Grant asked: "Has anyone told him we're having trouble?"

"Now, would they?" asked Long Pat. He went forward with Grant to greet the newcomers. Now they were near enough for their badges to be seen. The sheriff had three deputies with him, and that was not far off being a posse. He was a small, dark man, with a clipped voice. Grant called out: "We don't often see yuh, Ogden."

"I don't often get this far," the sheriff agreed, and looked down at Grant and Long Pat. The others were in the shadows, Lannigan among them, watching closely. "I'm on business," Ogden added. "I'm looking for a man name of Lannigan. Is he this way?"

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ALMOST before the meaning to the question had sunk into Lannigan's mind, Pat answered "No, an' I'd know if he was, Ogden. I met him in the town."

Ogden stared down at him. "Yuh sure?"

One of the others would give him away, Lannigan thought. They would see no point in Long Pat's lie. He felt two of them touch him. They closed up together, in front of him, hiding him from the sheriff. They were telling him as plainly as they could, to get out of sight. One of the men moved towards the bunk-house.

Lannigan stayed where he was.

"Yuh sure?" repeated Ogden, harshly.

Grant said slowly: "I don't much like that question, Ogden. Yuh've asked one and had it answered. That should be good enough."

"He was known to come this way," Ogden said.

"There are plenty of other places," objected Grant.

"Maybe. Yuh won't mind if I look around."

"I shall mind a lot," Grant said, and Lannigan could see the sheriff stiffen, until Grant added: "Until I know what yuh want Lannigan for."

"He's a bad *hombre*. Real bad. He's wanted for murder."

This was nonsense! But Ogden was serious, there was no doubt about that.

"Where?" asked Grant.

"Between here and the town. He was seen earlier to-day."

"Is that a fact?" asked Grant.

"I've evidence," rasped Ogden. "Grant I don't like the way yuh're behaving."

"I don't like the way yuh are," Grant said, carelessly, "but if yuh want to look around, yuh can." He turned away, and Lannigan's heart began to thump. "But yuh'll be wasting yuhr time."

"We'll see," said Ogden.

So they were going to search the outfit, going to question each man. Undoubtedly the sheriff or one of his deputies knew what he looked like. The madness of the whole situation came over Lannigan like a wave, and he felt hot and angry. He could not understand the way Grant and Long Pat behaved, unless it was the fact that the word 'murder' made it necessary for them to give him up

to the sheriff. Yet, after 'murder' had been uttered Grant had still acted as if Lannigan were not present.

Ogden got out of the saddle. It was so dark that Lannigan could not see his features. Long Pat turned to the Double-C men behind him, and said; "Have any've yuh seen this man Lannigan?"

No one spoke, but all shook their heads.

"Take a look in the bunk-houses," Grant said, still carelessly. "Pat, I want yuh an' Russell with me for five-ten minutes." He walked towards the ranch-house, and Long Pat followed. He had to pass Lannigan. He gripped Lannigan's arm and led him towards the ranch-house. Ogden and his men were already making their way towards the bunk-house.

Lannigan thought. "My new kit there, they'll recognize it." He followed Grant into the main room, where only one lamp was burning. Long Pat closed the door, and Grant turned and stared down at Lannigan.

"D'yuh know anything about this murder?"

"No."

"It was done to-day an' he's been here all to-day," Long Pat pointed out. "I'm wondering right now if we ought to have said he wasn't here."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Grant. "I reckon we'd better keep it up; though, if Ogden wants him he'll take him whatever we say."

He smiled tight-lipped at Lannigan. "Russell used to work for me," he said, "Ogden doesn't know he's left. He'll think yuh're Russell in here, with me. He won't ask questions. Yuh'll leave by one door as Ogden comes in at the other. There shouldn't be any difficulty, the man's got no sense."

"My new kit's in the bunk-house," Lannigan observed.

"Not now, it isn't," said Long Pat, "one of the boys went to collect it, didn't yuh see him going?"

Lannigan gave up, and asked in a wondering voice: "Didn't yuh know what Ogden was after?"

"Well, we've got minds," Long Pat said, mildly. "Ogden wouldn't arrive here with three deputies to ask us the time've day. It seemed likely he was looking for someone and the most likely someone was yuh. Quit worrying."

Grant asked: "Where did yuh come from, Lannigan?"

"Austin."

"Before that?"

"Not far outside Austin," Lannigan said. "I owned a small outfit. I lost it. I hit the trail, wanting to put as much land between me and what I'd lost as I could. I decided on Ridge City because it seemed a long way from any place else."

"That isn't an easy story to prove," Grant said.

"It can be proved," Lannigan assured him. "Anyone in Austin will tell yuh that I owned Lazy-L. I lost it because I was a damned fool and thought I could outsmart a richer man than I was—and I let myself get drunk." He smiled tensely; the memory was not good. "I gambled it away," he confessed. "If I've a bad trouble, it's gambling and acting on impulse. I don't often get dead drunk." He looked as if he would like to laugh, but did not want to be heard outside the ranch-house.

His story was true, although he could have filled in more details. He did not think they mattered. He had left his ranch with nothing but two hundred and fifty dollars. He had not even owned a horse, that was why he had bought the sorry-looking roan which, later, Long Pat had bought.

Why had Long Pat bought that particular horse, when there were so many fine beasts on the ranch?

"If we want to prove it, maybe we can ride into Ridge tomorrow," said Long Pat. "The stage isn't going out until then, and there are two-three men from Austin in town. They came in on the stage."

"We could do that," Grant admitted. He raised his head sharply. "He's coming," he said. "Get out, Lannigan."

IT WAS DARK outside. He was left to his own devices, and stayed near an open window. He could see Ogden's face outlined

against the lamp. The man's sharp features were darkened by a thin moustache and a small, pointed beard.

"Satisfied?" Grant asked him

"I haven't seen Lannigan around," Ogden admitted, almost reluctantly, "but he headed this way. If yuh see him, hold him. We want him badly."

"Yuh sure he committed this murder?" Grant asked.

"Close on sure. He's wanted by Austin City for other crimes," Ogden went on, "he's dangerous and a killer. He calls himself Lannigan here, his real name's Corliss—Grab Corliss. Yuh'll hold him if he comes?" Ogden persisted.

"Sure." Grant lied effortlessly.

"Thanks."

The sheriff went out, and soon afterwards he and his men were riding off on the trail. Lannigan had waited until they had forked leather before he went back to the bunk-house. It seemed as if he would never be able to get his mind clear or free himself from trouble and suspicion.

Long Pat was coming down the verandah steps, calling: "Lannigan." Lannigan went over to him. "Which of them are yuh?" asked Long Pat, and there was a serious note in his voice.

"Lannigan."

"Know this Corliss?"

"By name. He's all the sheriff said he is."

"Why should they get yuh mixed up?"

"I can't answer that one."

Grant came out and said irritably: "He didn't commit any murder today, you reasoned that out. That's one thing in his favour. He can work the rest out as time goes on."

"Is that so?" asked Lannigan, his voice sharp.

"Sure it's so," said Grant.

Lannigan said: "My name's Lannigan. I've made a fool of myself once but that doesn't mean I'm going to let every man I meet make a fool of me." He took out his roll, stripped off all but a few five-dollar bills, and stuffed them into Grant's hands. The rancher was startled. "That'll pay for the horse and saddle," he said. "I'm riding out."

"Yuh're not," said Long Pat, alarmed.

"Well, stop me," challenged Lannigan.

It was forcing an issue, but he thought it necessary. He went to the bunk-house, where two of the others were sitting, collected his kit, which had been put back, took the saddle from the wall by the side of his bunk, and walked out again. Neither of the others spoke to him. He went to the corral. The piebald was near the gate. He climbed over, and began to fit the saddle. He was fuming, although he could not say why he felt so angry —except that he was being ridden. That kept recurring.

Footsteps drew near.

"What's got into yuh, Lannigan?" Long Pat asked and there was a surprised note in his voice. "I thought I knew men. I didn't think yuh were a quitter."

"There's one kind of place I always quit," said Lannigan, "and that's a mad-house." He finished fastening the straps and his pommel bag, and forked leather. "Yuh goin' to open the gate, or shall I jump?" he demanded.

"What's got into yuh?" Long Pat demanded again.

Lannigan said slowly: "Listen, Paterson. I was robbed on the trail after being cheated at Austin. I was taken into Arrowhead half-dead, and they saved my life and then threw me out. I went to Doc Jordan's and he behaved so well I couldn't believe it, and then he threw me out. I hit this outfit, and the same thing started again. Yuh didn't give me a chance to talk to Ogden, yuh told him half a story and me another half. I can see what's going to happen, but this time I'm not going to be thrown out, I'm going out on my own say-so. One day, maybe, someone will tell me a story that is worth listening to. They'll explain the mystery in Ridge County, and if they do maybe I'll admit that there is someone left in the place who's sane. Right now, I doubt that."

Long Pat said: "What're we to do, Jem?"

After a pause, Grant said: "Tell him, I guess. In the morning."

"Morning, nothing," said Lannigan. "I'll know the whole story by then or else I'll be twenty-thirty miles away, out of the county." He still sat in the saddle, and could just make out their forms. He judged that he had surprised, puzzled and worried them. "What about that gate?" he rasped.

"Okay," Grant said, we'll tell yuh—"

A shot broke across his words.

IT WAS not a clear *crack* like the shots which had been fired at Lannigan the previous night. It came from some distance off, and was followed by several more. The men on foot turned round. Someone called from the bunk-house: "Hear that?" Men began to run towards the corral.

Long Pat said: "Wait until we find what this is, Lannigan; maybe Ogden's run into those rustlers." He pushed open the gate as the men rushed up, carrying their saddles. Horses were ready quickly, Lannigan was one of four men ready to ride while the shooting was still going on. They could see nothing.

"Yuh riding with us?" Long Pat called out.

"Okay," said Lannigan. That decision was easy.

The piebald was a different calibre horse from Jordan's, he could feel the eagerness with which it began to gallop. There were two men on his right and one on his left. At least two others were following. That struck him as foolish. It might be that the shooting on the range was only to make it easy for someone to enter the ranch-house. Double-C was in the middle of serious trouble, and the trouble might lead to a raid on the buildings. He looked round and saw Long Pat. He edged towards him, and Pat said: "Yuh're doing fine."

"Listen. Is there likely to be a raid on the outfit anytime?"

"There could be."

"Then why are all've us riding out?"

Long Pat said: "I didn't think of that. But there's plenty of shooting going' on out there."

At least half-a dozen little flashes of flame showed up against the darkness. The shooting seemed to be half a mile or so ahead of them. They could hear the shots much more clearly now in spite of the thunder of the hoofs. Lannigan was still uneasy, but there was no doubt that the shooting was in earnest; he might have guessed wrong. Long Pat called: "We'll take a chance."

Lannigan wished that it were not so dark. The flashes were bright yellow and he could sometimes pick out the form of a man, but that was all.

The shooting faded out.

Lannigan, gun in hand, rode on but heard other riders in front of him. There were half a dozen or more, riding away at a gallop, as if they had discovered the arrival of the Double-C men and were giving up the fight. That was like the men who had started to chase him the previous night, but had given up too easily.

Long Pat drew alongside him. "We're going after them," he said, "yuh can please yuhrself." Then he quickened his pace and forged ahead.

7

LANNIGAN first saw the fire after Long Pat had spoken to him. It was a small one, not far off the trail, and dying down; a camp fire, such as anyone might make. In its glow he saw something else—a cow tied to a stake. Some branding was done that way. He rode towards it, and as he drew nearer he saw the branding irons lying by the side of the fire. He got down from the saddle. The cow was terrified and would not let him get near. He edged round, so that he could see the inside of its legs. There was a fresh brand, a Double-O, an easy brand to make out of Double-C.

Then he heard a groan.

He turned quickly, to see a man lying on the ground, only just visible. He hurried towards him.

The man was trying to speak. Lannigan put his head close to his lips,

and heard one word, one which seemed to stab through him.

"Corliss." That was all, just one word. "Corliss."

The man's head dropped back.

Lannigan straightened up and peered through the darkness into the confusion of the night. A few shots were being fired, hoofs were still thundering, but the fighting had gone further away and he seemed very much alone. There was nothing he could usefully do now. He covered the dead man's face with his own kerchief, and then turned to the hobbled cow. This time the beast allowed him to approach, and he freed it. The branding irons and the fire were all the evidence that would be needed of the truth of his story.

He supposed that he had better go back.

He played with the idea of taking the body over the saddle, but *coyotes* were not likely to be on the scene quickly. Other men could come here, with tools, and dig a rough grave to save the flesh from desecration. He was stiff, too; he was always being reminded that he was not yet riding fit.

He heard riders approaching, and rode towards them; that relieved him of responsibility. One was Grant, the other a man whom he had seen at the outfit. He told his story briefly.

"So Ogden ran into rustlers," Grant said.

"Was it Ogden?"

"Yes, we've seen him," said Grant. "That is, we heard him giving orders. We'll send men out to bury this stranger," he added. "Let's get back."

"Yuh're not forgetting yuh owe me a story," Lannigan said.

"No."

They rode back to the ranch-house in silence. There, Grant briefed two men to go back to the fire, bury the dead man after finding out—if they could—who he was, and to go into Ridge City with a report. It was getting late by then. Long Pat came in. He had little to say except to confirm that Ogden had been among the men who had been shooting. Then another man arrived. He had seen Ogden and talked to him. The sheriff's party had run across eight or nine men, branding beeves, deep in the woods at the side of the trail. They had tried to make a surprise attack, but someone had warned the rustlers. Ogden, coming round from behind them, had driven them towards Double-C. Until the Double-C riders had appeared, the rustlers had headed straight for the outfit. Afterwards they had swung round on their tracks and gone towards Ridge City and the Ridge itself. For the first time Lannigan realized that Ridge City was so named because of the great ridge which ran alongside the trail towards Double-C.

"Where's Ogden now?" Grant asked his informant.

"Still looking for them," said the man. "He reckoned he would be back to-morrow, if not to-night."

"That's okay," said Grant, "except that Ogden now knows about the trouble we're having."

"A sheriff seems to me the right man to know," Lannigan remarked.

"Not that sheriff," declared Grant, harshly. "Pat, yuh can talk to Lannigan."

"Sure," said Long Pat, obligingly.

THERE WAS something in the foreman that Lannigan liked. Perhaps it was the lurking humour in his eyes, although there was little humour in this place. Nor had there been at Arrowhead or Doc Jordan's. It was as if circumstances weighed down on Paterson but could not wholly repress him. Long Pat sat at a knee-hole desk, with his elbow near a lamp. He was rolling the makings one-handed, and said: "Aren't I makin' them right?"

"They'll do," Lannigan said.

"D'yuh smoke?"

"I did. I haven't started since I came round," Lannigan said. "Here an' now, I think I'll make a start."

"Help yuhrself." Long Pat tossed over the oilskin bag of tobacco and some rice papers. "Listen," he said, "the first time I saw yuh I took a liking to yuh. Maybe I was wrong to do that. I'm staking plenty on yuh being Lannigan and not Corliss."

"We needn't go into that again. I'm

Lannigan."

"Right. Here's the simple facts, Lannigan. Between Tandy and Jem Grant there's been trouble for a long time. The biggest part of the trouble is that Grant and me can't prove Tandy's at the back of it. We're sure, but we can't prove it. He's pulled a lot of mean tricks. This rustling is like the others. Little things, to hurt and worry us. Barbed wire over waterholes, broken fences, a few cows driven off, and—worse."

"How much worse?"

"Arrowhead and other outfit's cattle on our ranges, some with the brands burned off and new ones on. Not much, not enough to cause big trouble, just enough to make a lot of people in Ridge County think that Jem Grant's the cause of it. Jem's had a bad time. He deserved better than he's getting now. Half the folk in Ridge City won't say 'howdy' to him. He can stand that, but it hurts. His father helped to found Ridge City. And Ogden—yuh heard Ogden. Was he friendly to Grant?"

"No more than Grant was to him."

"Jem's sore. Ogden always starts arguments. Ogden would take the word of any other rancher that there was no stranger on the outfit. He wouldn't take Jem's."

Lannigan's eyes twinkled. "Well, Grant was lying."

"All right, all right; yuh knew that but Ogden didn't. Ogden behaved that way just because he wanted to make Jem sore. All of Tandy's men do that."

"What makes Tandy own Ogden?"

"Tandy runs all Ridge City. His men hold all the official positions. Yuh've got be a Tandy man to get along. It suits most people, but it doesn't suit Jem. Mean things happen, Lannigan. Jem has to buy stores from Tandy. Stores come, with bags open, a lot of waste and loss, machines broken—things like that. It hurts plenty. Yuh can never prove it, but it always leads back to Tandy. That man's so mean that—" he broke off, grinning. "Well, yuh've some idea of the way he works."

"Some. What caused this?"

"Two things. Jem Grant is one of the last ranchers with money and any influence at all. There are two other small outfits but they don't amount to much. Tandy would be kingpin in this part of Texas if it weren't for Jem. So everything that can be done to weaken Jem's position is being done. He can't take away his money, so it has to be other ways. What's happened would have broken some men." The glow died out of Long Pat's eyes, and he said sharply: "I'm one of those who believe Tandy killed Jem's wife."

Lannigan said slowly: "That's sounds a serious accusation."

"It is. It happened four years ago. Just before it, Tandy offered to buy Jem out. Jem turned it down. Then things began to happen. Jem's wife used to drive out alone in a small buggy. One day the horse bolted, she was thrown and killed. That horse had been frightened—no one knows how, but it was not a horse that took fright easily. Her death left Jem in a bad way. He'd been married twenty years, he married young. He had two boys—"

Lannigan's lips tightened because of the pause which followed that remark. 'He *had* two boys.'

"The younger one he's sent out east, for schooling. He keeps him there. The older boy, Young Jem, has turned out bad. There are boys who can be influenced one way're the other," went on Long Pat, "an' Young Jem was one of them. I doan say he would ever have turned out like his father or grandfather, but he didn't have to go all bad. Tandy worked on him. Oh, no one knows it's Tandy, but I tell yuh that's who it was. He started to mix with hard-drinking, quick-shooting, no-good *hombres* and he still does. He hasn't been over this doorway in more'n two years."

Long Pat paused again, to ask: "Yuh followin', Lannigan?"

"Closely, I guess."

"Yuh've heard 'most all. Except one thing. Yuh doan want to misunderstand me, Lannigan. Jem Grant didn't look at any other woman except his wife, while she was alive. Nossir, the whole of the country knew that. But there was Marion Gray, as she was

then. Daughter of a man who used to run an outfit between us an' Ridge City. He lost all he'd got. No one knows for sure, but we guess Tandy broke him. Grant and his wife were mighty good to that girl. She lived here for some years. Then she had to go into town, when Mrs. Grant died. Grant reckoned it wouldn't be right for her to stay on with only a black woman in the house. So he sent her into Ridge City, to stay with friends. A year ago she married Tandy." Pat shook his long head helplessly. "I never knew why. I never understood why. But things get around here, Lannigan, an' it soon got around that she wasn't all that Tandy hoped for." He laughed, without amusement. "Tandy wouldn't expect his wife to have a different room from his, but that's how it is. Since that time, Tandy's been kind've different. No less mean, he's natural mean, but he's stayed out at Arrowhead, he spends little time in the town, he seldom goes out visiting. He never rides alone and he won't let his wife ride alone. I guess yuh can now see more easily why there was trouble when she took yuh into the house."

LANNIGAN nodded.

"There's an added reason," Long Pat went on. "Arrowhead's the place where bad *hombres* hitting the trail from Austin an' other places east and south always fetch up. Not many get across that desert without meeting trouble, especially if they're not prepared for it. Tandy always saw them looked after and fed, but would allow none in the house; it was because his wife said so.

"Yuh beginning to see why Tandy hated yuh before he even knew yuhr name?"

"I guess I can see," admitted Lannigan.

"Well, what've yuh to say?"

"What can I say?" asked Lannigan. "Yuh're sure Tandy is the man behind Grant's troubles?"

"As sure's I'm here. All we need is proof."

"Then I'm against Tandy," Lannigan said. He laughed. "I guess that means I'm for Jem Grant."

"I reckoned yuh would see it that way."

"There is one trouble," Lannigan said. "This man Corliss. I told yuh the dead rustler gave me that name, nothing else?"

"Yeh."

"Corliss is around. I'm being confused with him."

Long Pat said: "I guess so. I can also guess who started the mixing up."

"Tandy?"

"Sure's I'm here."

"But the man Corliss is around here," Lannigan pointed out. "That gets more confusing, because he might get found."

Long Pat said: "Yeh, I know he might get found. But he's a bad *hombre*. He's already started something. Yuh can get blamed for that something. If I was yuh, Lannigan, I wouldn't hit the Ridge City trail much. I wouldn't take chances that way. I should stick around here or on the range with the boys. Yuh've seen how they stick to Jem. They're good boys. They'll fight all that need be, and if Jem says yuhr okay, then they'll always be on yuhr side. They covered yuh up to-night, didn't they? They will again."

"I'll get to know them, and say thanks," said Lannigan.

"Just get to know them," said Long Pat, dryly. "Are yuh satisfied now?"

"I'm considerably more satisfied," Lannigan said, "but I've still got one question to ask."

"Name it."

"Those men who fired at me last night," said Lannigan. "Do yuh know why they're active on that part of the trail?"

"Nope. I only know they are." Long Pat leaned back and scratched his chin. "I shouldn't worry too much about that or anything for a while, Lannigan. I've been watching yuh. Yuh haven't fully recovered from the journey across the desert. Yuh want to take it easy. No one will worry yuh. Settle yuhrself in. Yuh'll pick up a lot that way. Yuh needn't worry about Ogden, we'll always cover yuh against him. It seems to me," Long

Pat went on, "that we might be mighty grateful, one day, that yuh headed out this way. Doc Jordan maybe thought that way, too, or he wouldn't have sent yuh here."

"What will yuh do?" asked Lannigan.

"More-less the same as yuh," Long Pat assured him, "I always get along. There's just one thing I miss in this yer outfit. Time was when we had it in plenty, but all of us seems to have forgotten how it goes now."

"And what is it?"

"Laughter," said Long Pat. He laughed dryly. "Yuh see what I mean? We miss Larry Benson," he added, "Larry used to keep us alive. Him and his guitar. Have yuh heard his guitar?

"No. Should I have done?"

"He's at Arrowhead. He and Jem bawled each other out, and Larry went into Ridge City and got himself drunk and said he was tired of staying at Double-C. Another time he would have sobered up and come back, but one of Tandy's men got at him and he moved out." Pat shrugged his shoulders. "It's one of those things," he said. "I guess yuh're tired, and I could do with some shut-eye myself."

NEXT DAY, Ogden rode in again. Lannigan stayed in the bunkhouse, and was not questioned. Ogden was busy only with the affair of the night before. He asked questions of the men still at the outfit; heard about the dead rustler and the name Corliss; let it be known that he was not surprised, and rode off. He was protected this time by a posse of six men.

Long Pat and others went out with him.

They came back to report that as far as they could judge, no cattle had actually been moved the night before, although they had found several with the Double-O brand. Lannigan asked why two brands so close as Double-O and Double-C had been allowed to get established.

"Tandy," said Long Pat. "He owns Double-O. That was the name of an old outfit, across the river. There wasn't any danger of confusion until Tandy bought a ranch this side've the river and the old Double-O. He bought all the cattle over, so that sometimes they get mixed on the border ranges. It wouldn't matter all that much if it wasn't for the rustling."

"Well, there is rustling," Lannigan remarked, dryly.

The next ten days passed quietly, without further disturbances. At the end of them, Lannigan was as tough as ever he had been.

In the whole of that ten days, Lannigan did not see Jem Grant smile once. Long Pat was still the man who chafed most against this atmosphere, but there was little he could do.

By that time, Lannigan had ridden most of Double-C range and he had a working knowledge of the rest of Ridge County. The great ridge itself was the western border. Arrowhead, to the south, was a small outfit, because Tandy preferred it to look as if he owned only small places. Bar-2 was the biggest outfit, owned by Tandy but run by a Swede named Larsen. Double-O, the outfit which might cause trouble although another small one, was run by a grizzled Scot named Hamilton. Another medium sized outfit, the Circle-2, was independently owned as far as Long Pat knew; but, he said, he had his doubts. Tandy was probably behind it.

On the morning of the eleventh day, Lannigan and a little puncher named Pete was riding the western range, close by the ridge. The cattle had strayed further than usual, and they were making sure that none of them climbed the sides of the ridge where they were easy enough, and so gave trouble for the fall round-up. It was already warm, although early morning. They rode easily, Pete whistling under his breath, Lannigan watching the ridge and feeling more than ever curious about it. They drew near the spot where he had been fired at on his first night on this trail, and he thought he saw horses under the trees.

Pete watched the direction of his pointing finger. "Yuh're right," he said.

"No reason why there should be horses," said Lannigan, "but I guess no reason why there shouldn't be."

"Yuh'd better ride back," Pete said.

"Why's that"

"Ogden might be out with a *posse*."

"I could take a chance," said Lannigan.

They rode nearer, and soon they saw cattle as well as horses bunched beneath the trees. Men were examining the brands.

Pete said: "That's Double-O outfit."

"On whose land?"

"Ours. They're way east of their own." Pete waved a hand vaguely, and then pointed. "See that big fellow? That's Black Joe, foreman at Double-O. No one ever liked Black Joe except Hamilton, I guess. He's poison."

"What do yuh suggest doin'?"

"One've us could watch, the other go back and report," said Pete. "Or we could both watch. There's eight-nine men there, and we can't bring half that many from the outfit, most've us are riding the range this morning. We'll wait, I guess."

"This seems as good a place as any," said Lannigan.

They were under trees, some quarter of a mile away from the Double-O riders. Black Joe was a colossal creature, with a black beard which made him more than ever noticeable. Against him red-haired Hamilton seemed tiny. They were spending a lot of time inspecting the cattle. Odd thoughts ran through Lannigan's mind. This might mean that Double-O were actually rustling in the open, or—

He stopped thinking.

THERE WAS a rustle of sound behind him—no more than a rustle, but it was enough to put him on the alert. It was not the sound of an animal or a bird. He sat dead still. Pete seemed to have noticed nothing. The rustle came again, and Lannigan dropped his hand to his gun.

Hardly had he done so when there was a shrill whistle from behind him. Pete swung round. The men with the cattle jerked their heads up. Lannigan saw how they moved, and knew this was a pre-arranged signal. He and Pete had been seen, someone had come round behind them to block their path, the Double-O men were already in the saddle, riding towards them.

Pete snapped: "Let's ride!"

"Yuh c'n stay there," a man said from the bushes. He was hidden from sight, but the muzzle of his gun showed. He was no more than twenty yards away from them.

"An' I say the same," called a second man, from the other side.

Pete growled: "I'll do what I like!" He kneed his bronc, swung round—and then, as a shot rang out, he lurched forward in the saddle. Lannigan saw blood appear on his shirt, high up, by the shoulder. He himself sat absolutely still; the piebald did what was expected of him.

The man who had fired growled: "I warned yuh."

Pete looked towards him. He had stopped, and was sitting helplessly in the saddle. The blood was flowing more freely.

"Come this way, Pete," Lannigan called.

Pete turned and rode towards him. Lannigan got out of the saddle, and as the men with Hamilton and Black Joe rode up, he was cutting away Pete's shirt. The wound was high, and there was no fear of broken bones, but it was giving the puncher some pain. Lannigan tore a kerchief into strips, and began to bind the wound.

He was conscious of the ring of riders surrounding them. He did not look at them, but went on with his work. He had nearly finished when Black Joe said in a curiously high-pitched voice: "That's enough. Yuh can finish that later."

Lannigan did not look round, but said: "Yuh'n me don't agree, stranger." He finished bandaging, while Black Joe slapped his horse's flank, and stretched out a hand. He gripped Lannigan's shoulder, and his fingers had the strength of steel. "I told yuh that was enough," he growled.

Lannigan looked up for the first time. "I shouldn't do that," he de-

clared. "Yuh might get hurt." He stared into the big man's face and angry eyes. The pressure tightened. "Well, I warned yuh," he said. He raised his right hand, gripped Black Joe's wrist, and twisted. One moment the big Double-O foreman was sitting in the saddle, towering over him; the next he thudded on to the ground with a shattering crash.

Pete's eyes brightened. Lannigan felt as if a load had been lifted off his shoulders—although every man in the crowd, except Black Joe and Hamilton, drew their guns.

8

THE riders made a circle about the two Double-C men, their guns threatening. Hamilton was a little nearer the centre than the others. Black Joe, getting up slowly, one knee and one hand on the ground, was looking up with an expression which warned Lannigan that this man was really bad. He had acted as if he were, in fact, the boss of Double-O. Unless Hamilton could exert a restraining influence, anything might happen now. In spite of that, Lannigan still felt light-hearted.

He glanced at Pete; the little puncher's face was set in a smile. That might be a grin to hide the pain from his wound, but such a grin would not explain the smile in his eyes.

Pete was enjoying this, too.

Black Joe stood up, and dropped one hand to his gun.

Hamilton said crisply: "We'll take them into Ridge City, we won't have more shooting."

"That so?" asked Black Joe, in his high-pitched voice. "I don't let any man do that to me and get away with it."

"Joe—" began Hamilton.

Black Joe leaned forward, swinging his left arm viciously, aiming at Lannigan's head. Lannigan moved his head to one side and drove a punch to the big man's stomach; the force of the impact was increased by the foreman's rush. There was a squelching sound as the blow landed, and Black Joe doubled up, hands clutching his stomach. His gun fell. Lannigan bent down, whipped the left-hand gun out of the big man's belt and flung it into long grass. Then he kicked the other out of the foreman's reach. He drew back while Black Joe was still crouched double and gasping.

Pete's grin broadened; but he shot a quick glance over his shoulder, as if he realized that this joke would soon turn against them.

Hamilton said: Yuh've asked for trouble."

"The man who starts it does the asking," Lannigan said.

"What's yuhr quarrel with us?"

"Over-branding our beeves," Hamilton said, tight-lipped.

"That so? Double-C could maybe be over-branded Double-O. The other way about it's not so easy."

"We've counted twenty head of our cattle over-branded." Hamilton said. "It's not going to continue. Yuh an' the man with yuh are ridin' into the town. Yuh'll see Ogden."

Lannigan said gently: "I don't know that I want to see Ogden all that much, but if someone's going to see him, it might as well be me. And Pete. This is Double-C land. Yuh forgot that when yuh ordered shooting."

"Our cattle—"

Lannigan said: "Maybe some of your cattle was on our land. Beeves do get around. No one at Double-C moved or over-branded them. If yuh've anything more to say about that, I suggest yuh talk to Jem Grant."

"It's not Grant's doing, it—"

Lannigan's lips curled derisively. "Yuh got that much sense? Then there's hope for yuh. It wasn't Double-C doing."

Hamilton said: "Yuh talk too much. Who are yuh?"

"Just a Double-C rider," Lannigan said.

That question surprised him. He had expected to be recognized. Perhaps he had altered since he had been

seen in Ridge City.

Black Joe was straightening up, and there was naked evil in his eyes. He took his hands from his stomach to feel for his guns. When he found them missing, he stiffened. His eyes were more bloodshot now, and once or twice he winced; Lannigan had kept nothing back from that punch.

"How're yuh feeling, Joe?" asked Hamilton.

"One day—" began Black Joe.

"Yuh're goin' to learn sense," Lannigan finished for him. "Maybe it will take a long time. Hamilton, yuh ought to know this. Any shooting from yuhr men now will rate high—as murder. Don't forget it. Are yuh going to see Grant or Ogden?"

Hamilton said stubbornly: "We're riding into town."

"Okay. We'll fork leather, Pete," Lannigan said, mildly.

Black Joe was standing upright, now, and staring at Lannigan closely. As Pete got his leg across, the Double-O foreman's expression was a curious mixture of hatred, surprise, fear and puzzlement.

Joe's expression altered and he took a step forward.

"Joe—" began Hamilton.

"That's *Lannigan*!" exclaimed Black Joe.

LANNIGAN forked leather. He had bluffed them so hard that he still had his guns. Theirs were drawn and pointing towards him but the odds were nearer level than they had been before.

Hamilton snapped: "Are you sure?"

"I'm dead sure. I saw him—" Black Joe broke off, and for the first time he grinned. He looked delighted. "I guess this beats all! Lannigan, wanted for murder! Won't the Sheriff be pleased t'see yuh, Lannigan? Put up yuhr hands."

Lannigan kept his hands resting on the saddle in front of him, leaning forward slightly, smiling faintly. "Sure, won't he," he said. "Haven't yuh learned enough for one day?"

"Yuh're doing the learning," Black Joe said. He turned to one of the riders and motioned him forward. "Take his irons."

The man came forward.

One moment Lannigan was on the top edge of tension, undecided, badly worried. The next he grinned.

"Haven't yuh forgotten my other name?"

"What name's that?" asked Hamilton.

"Keep yuhr trap shut," Joe growled, "or—"

"Corliss," said Lannigan.

Pete gasped. "Lannigan, yuh're crazy!"

Those words only just reached Lannigan, who was watching Black Joe and Hamilton. And he saw an incredible change. The anger and gloating triumph died out of Black Joe's eyes. He drew back, staring. There was a stir among the men with him. Hamilton sat on his horse as if he had been frozen stiff.

Black Joe said: "Yuh—yuh're *Corliss*."

"Ask Ogden," said Lannigan.

Black Joe licked his lips, glanced at Hamilton, then looked back at Lannigan. Pete was sitting absolutely still, now, hardly daring to move. Lannigan kept grinning, but his heart was thumping. Why had the name of Corliss affected them like this?

"Why—why didn't yuh say so?" muttered Black Joe.

"Hadn't yuh better be hitting the trail?" asked Lannigan. It seemed the one way to follow up this heaven-sent advantage.

Hamilton said: "Corliss—" and his voice trailed off.

"Going to ride?" asked Lannigan.

Black Joe looked at Hamilton. Hamilton nodded. They signalled to the riders who were sitting in that startled circle. Black Joe forked leather.

Pete said: "What do you know about that?"

Lannigan pushed back his hat and scratched his head. "I just don't make anything of it," he said, "I don't—" he began to grin. Pete grinned back. He began to chuckle. There was a rasping noise at the back of Pete's throat, as if he were taking unaccustomed exercise. Then Lannigan began to laugh. All of them had been *frightened* of 'Corliss.'

He stopped laughing at last. Pete

gulped, and drew his right hand across his eyes. "It was worth ridin' this way," he gasped.

Lannigan said: "It doesn't make sense."

"That's what makes it so funny."

"I thought yuh was crazy," said Pete, "I sure thought yuh was crazy. They don't like Mr. Lannigan, because of the story Ogden has been spreading, but they ought to have hated Corliss. I thought yuh was asking to be lynched right here an' now, instead—" he looked more sober. "What d'yuh reckon it means, Lannigan?"

"It can bear thinking about," Lannigan said.

"Yuh're right, at that." Pete chuckled again. "I've wanted to see Black Joe on his back for a long time," he said. "Yuh heard about him?"

"To me, he's just one of Ridge County's surprises," Lannigan admitted. "We may's well talk an' ride."

"Suits me," said Pete. They turned back on the trail. "Black Joe, now. He's been riding for Tandy and Hamilton most of ten years. He's a no good *hombre,* with a big-mouth, and he can do a lot of harm. He keeps his men down by bawling them out, no other way. We don't like Black Joe."

"I'm backing yuhr judgment," Lannigan said.

LONG PAT and Jem Grant were in the office, a small room reached from the big room of the ranch-house. As soon as they saw Pete's wounded shoulder, they started asking questions. Lannigan suggested they should look after Pete first and ask questions afterwards. Long Pat agreed, and called for a boy. A shiny black came running. Water was put on the stove, fresh bandages and antiseptic brought; soon Pete's shoulder was dressed as well as Doc Jordan could have dressed it.

Jem Grant said: "Now, what's happened?"

"Yuh do the talking, Lannigan," said Pete.

Lannigan told the story quickly and well. He emphasized some points: the fact that they had accused Double-C punchers of rustling and over-branding was one, the fact that it was now known that he was at Double-C was another and the effect of the name Corliss was a third. That came last, and he saw that the other men realized its significance. Pete had done already, although neither of them had spoken of it.

Double-O, from Hamilton and Black Joe downwards, were scared of Corliss *and probably worked for him.*

Jem Grant put that into words.

"That's how I figured it," Lannigan agreed.

"It's mighty funny," said Grant.

Pete grinned. "Funny! I'll say it is!"

But Grant was not smiling. He was staring with set features at Lannigan.

At last Long Pete broke the silence.

"What's on yuhr mind, Jem?"

Grant drew a deep breath. "I can't make it out," he said. "I can understand Black Joe and Hamilton turning and riding off, because I would be prepared to believe anything of that outfit. From Hamilton downwards, it's bad. I'm not so troubled about the talk of rustling. No one in this county would believe that of Double-C. But—" he turned and looked at Lannigan, and his brown eyes seemed to burn "—what I can't understand is why Lannigan said he was Corliss—unless he *is* Corliss."

9

LANNIGAN did not reply at once to the accusation behind those words. He continued to watch the Double-C owner, knowing that Pete and Long Pat were staring at him intently.

Grant said: "Well?"

"We've had all this out before," Lannigan said.

"There are new conditions now," Grant reminded him.

"Yuh think they're new. The fact

is that we know how to place Double-O. We know this man Corliss has influence around here. We already guessed it, after the man who gave me the name before he died. What's new about it?"

"Yuh're playing with words," Grant said. "I'm not having it said that Corliss rides for me."

"He doesn't."

"Double-O men think he does."

"Does their opinion count that much?"

Grant clenched his hands. "Listen, Lannigan, I'm not taking chances. There might be one—two men on Double-O who would run this story to Ogden. They might get a reward. I've no objection to taking a chance with Lannigan, but I'm not taking one with Corliss."

Lannigan said: "And yuh feel sure I'm Corliss?"

"That's so."

Lannigan shrugged. "I'd better ride out," he said.

"Yuh deny it."

"I deny it," Lannigan said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "but my denial won't make all that difference. Yuh won't believe it. Yuh might pretend to for a while, yuh might kid yuhrself that yuh're convinced, but when anything happens yuh can't understand yuh'll come back to it—I'm Corliss. I'm not, but that doesn't signify."

Long Pat said: "Jem, I reckon—"

"Yuh're okay, Pat," Lannigan said, "but this is between me and Grant. Yuh know it. Grant knows it. I'd better ride out."

Grant nodded. "I guess that's so," he said.

Lannigan got up and walked out of the office, across the big room, out on the verandah. The sun was striking hard down on it, a shimmering heat-haze was rising from the roofs of the buildings and from the ground itself. There was something familiar and pleasant about Double-C. He liked it; he had liked it here from the first and would have been content to ride this range for a while. It was not to be.

He walked across to the bunk-house and stood at the door, looking in.

He had come here with two hundred dollars and nothing else but his clothes and a bowie knife and rope. Now he had a horse that would take him anywhere, and everything he needed to hit the trail. When he had paid for these things he would have the better part of a hundred dollars left. So it had served some purpose for him.

Long Pat came over. "I suppose yuh have to leave."

"Yuh know it," Lannigan said.

"I suppose."

"Yuh know it," Lannigan repeated.

Long Pat's eyes were filled with that repressed laughter which made him a man to like.

"Yuh could help."

"How?" Lannigan considered. "I'm outlawed—it amounts to that. Between Grant, Tandy and Corliss I'm going to meet trouble on every side. It seems to me that I would be wise to get right out of the country."

"Oh, sure. Wise. Yuh're not so wise in some ways," Long Pat said. "It wasn't wise to tell Black Joe yuh were Corliss, but it worked. Some men have luck that way. I've a feeling yuh're one of them. Here in Ridge County, we need a man like yuh, Lannigan."

"Yuh haven't made it obvious."

"I'm trying to now," Long Pat said. "A great deal goes on in this country we don't know about. Yuh're a man who can look after himself. Up on the ridge and in the hills beyond it, yuh could live through the Fall, through Winter if need be. I could stock yuh up. Yuh could get around, finding out what there is to find. Yuh might discover where this man Corliss has his hide-out."

Lannigan shook his head.

He felt convinced that the wiser thing was to ride out. He was not happy about it, but logic told him that he would be a fool to do anything else.

And then, unbidden, quite suddenly and without warning, a face appeared in front of his mind's eye. Marion Tandy's.

"I would stake yuh," Long Pat said. "And I would meet yuh reg'lar near the Ridge. Yuh know enough

about Grant to realize that if we could give him proof of what is happening, proof that this Corliss is someone else, he would stake us."

"I doubt that."

"Yuh're being plain stubborn," Long Pat declared, "an' I don't know that I blame yuh for that, Lannigan, but I'm going to do something I haven't asked in twenty years."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to ask yuh to stay on. As a favour." Pat's eyes were smiling. "That's taken some doing, Lannigan."

Lannigan smiled. "I appreciate it."

"Okay," Long Pat said, as if he realized that it was no use talking further. "I'll be out by the Ridge, two days from now, near the bridge —yuh know the bridge?"

Lannigan nodded.

"I'll be there if yuh've changed yuhr mind," said Long Pat. "The fact is simple, Lannigan. In my opinion, we all will go on much the same as we have been doing for four-five years. We won't get any place. Ridge County is going bad, it's a set-up ripe for a man like Corliss if he has a big party riding for him. It's a prosperous township, a prosperous county, and it's wide open for a really bad *hombre* like Corliss. Already we know Double-O is working with him—"

"Yuh're forgetting something," Lannigan pointed out, "yuh're forgetting that Double-O will find out pretty soon that I'm not Corliss. And I'm only one man."

"I guess yuh're only one, but any man who can handle Black Joe the way yuh did means that yuh're worth two or three," said Long Pat. "Lannigan, I don't get around much. I've spent most of my life around these parts. There was a time when I liked it, but I don't like it now. I'd quit, only it seems to me there's a lot to be done, and my roots are deep in these ranges. Howso—what I'm trying to say is this. I've learned to know men. Now and again a man comes riding through, and I can see he's got what the others don't have. Yuh're one of them. Any man who can handle Black Joe that way, any man with the nerve yuh had when yuh met those riders, is one of them. They don't come so often. I used to think that Jem Grant was one, but he isn't. I don't know of a man in Ridge County could lead a fight against Tandy *and* Corliss and stand a chance of winning. Listen—yuh know the men in this outfit by now."

"Surely," agreed Lannigan.

"They'd follow yuh," Long Pat said, simply.

"Only if Grant told them to."

"If they thought Grant was wrong and yuh was right, they'd follow yuh," Long Pat said. "They haven't said so, but it's true. And there are others who would follow yuh. Seems to me yuh chose to hit Ridge City without realizing yuh were wanted here mighty bad."

Lannigan laughed. "If I was talking to yuh this way, yuh would say I was plumb crazy."

"So yuh would be. They wouldn't follow me," Long Pat retorted. "I'll tell yuh something else, Lannigan. Yuh're sore with life because yuh allowed yuhrself to be fooled and cheated out've yuhr own outfit. Yuh think yuh're a wandering no-good *hombre*. Yuh've uprooted yuhrself, but yuh're a man who needs roots. Don't forget it. If Ridge City can be cleaned up, there is no place better for getting rooted again. That's a fact. I hope I'll be seeing yuh," he said. "I'll get yuhr pay-roll."

"Yuh'll set the pony against that, an' I'll owe yuh something." Long Pat shook his head.

"Yuh've earned that pony," he said, "and all the rest, by telling us what yuh have about Double-O. Grant's just told me to tell yuh that. If yuh refuse to accept it," Long Pat added, "I shall considered yuh a stubborn cayuse not worth a jackrabbit's tail, and I don't want to remember you that way."

Lannigan said: "Okay. I'm appreciating it."

HE RODE out half an hour afterwards, The men at the

outfit spoke briefly to send him on his way. He wondered if Long Pat was right, if these men would follow any lead he gave them. It was a new idea—new that was, as far as Double-C was concerned. He had thought them tolerant but likely to turn hostile, as Grant had turned. In the past, he had led men—when there had been trouble; they had supported him, but he had made a fool of himself and so denied himself the right of leadership.

He rode north-west towards the far end of the ridge. There were other Double-C riders there, men to whom he would like to say "howdy" again before he rode on. There had been some trouble with a fence near the Falls. He had visited the spot twice. At two or three steep places cattle could fall over and fences had been erected. Where stakes had rotted and broken they were being replaced. That was almost all there was to do on Double-C at that time of the year, the beeves looked after themselves.

He heard the roar of the Falls in his ears when he was a long way off. The ground was broken, hilly and wooded, but a few cattle roamed about. Soon, from a hill, he could see the sun reflected on the water of the Falls.

There were trees near the water's edge and he could see the broken fence in one place, high up the hillside. Two or three horses were cropping at the grass. The Double-C men were hidden from him by the trees.

He rode up the ridge, which sloped like the side of a hill there.

He reached the top, and paused for a moment.

He sensed that he was being watched, and that the watcher had not intended to shoot him. The watcher could have killed him, by now, perhaps before he had even dreamed that any one was there.

He reached the trees.

He grinned with relief. It was dark and cool beneath them and a man could play hide-and-seek here for hours without being in any danger. He glanced over his shoulder, but all he could see were trees and shrubs. Then he broke through the trees.

The horses were cropping close by the fence, which had been repaired. There was no sign of the men.

Then he saw a man's hat—

It sent a shiver of alarm through him. The hat was thrown carelessly down, and resting on its crown. No man in his senses would be walking about without a hat. It was by the side of a large bush. He could see there on the ground the tools with which the men had been working, but no sign of any living thing except the horses.

Then he saw a man's head and shoulders; another head; *four men in all*, lying on the ground, in odd positions. There were guns in their hands. One was staring up towards the sky, but his eyes were sightless.

These men were dead.

10

HE DID NOT once glance round, although Lannigan was sure that he had been followed. He stood for a moment, staring at the four men—the only Double-C punchers not at the ranch. They had fought hard. The grass about them was littered with cartridge cases.

One man was sprawled forward, facing the other side of the river.

The roar of the falls was loud in Lannigan's ears.

That man had been killed with a shot from the other side. Lannigan pictured the scene in his mind's eye. They had been resting after the work was finished, talking, laughing perhaps, even playing dice. There was a fire, burnt out now, and over it a billy-can, with bubbling coffee inside it. Food was spread about; so they had been interrupted in the middle of a meal. Shots had come across the river and they had rushed

for their Winchesters; and then—

He picked up one gun, easing it out of a stiff hand. He opened it and saw that it was empty. All the guns were empty. The shots which had killed three of these men had been fired at close quarters.

He saw what that meant, and a fierce anger welled up inside him. They had been out of ammunition, forced to surrender, and their assailants had come close and callously shot them down.

He looked behind him. There were the trees, looking almost solidly massed, the shadows beneath their branches cool and inviting. He could see no man, heard no sound. Had he been followed only to be allowed to go his own way when it was seen where he was heading?

There was only one thing to do; he must return to Double-C and report what he had found.

He covered the faces of the men with their own kerchiefs.

He heard a fresh sound, above the roar of the water; a fluttering sound, and a wind. A shadow crossed over his. He looked up quickly, and saw a carrion bird, which had ventured so close that he had felt the stir of its wings. When he had gone the others, flying high, little specks against the bright blue, would come swooping down.

Then a thought struck him. The birds would have been at their obscene work had some one not frightened them away.

He turned again—

It was a man on foot and leading a horse. The sun was in Lannigan's eyes and prevented him from seeing the newcomer's face clearly. He waited with a hand on his gun. As the other drew nearer, he saw that he was young, little more than a boy. His horse was limping.

He recognized the lad—The Boy from Arrowhead. He had seen him only once or twice, but there was no mistaking his features. He looked scared, but came on courageously. Lannigan dropped his hand from his gun and went to meet him. The Boy drew nearer. His lips were drawn; he was pale; his eyes were clouded, as if he had looked upon an awful horror. In hours, perhaps, this boy had become a man.

He did not recognize Lannigan; and Lannigan thought it better not to introduce himself at first.

"Who're yuh?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"Martin," said The Boy, huskily. "Boy Martin."

"What're yuh doin' here?"

"I could ask that've yuh." So Boy Martin had courage. Lannigan hardened his face, and rasped: "I'm askin' yuh!"

The Boy said: "I was riding this way. I heard shooting. I came to find out what it was about. I discovered—this. I stayed around to keep the birds away."

"How far have yuh been from here?"

"Not far."

"Who's with yuh? Some one was on the other side of the trees when I rode here."

"That would be—Larry."

"Who's this Larry?"

"Larry Benson. We're from Arrowhead."

Lannigan asked: "Where's Benson now?"

"Watching, I guess."

"Why did he send yuh to talk to me?"

The Boy shrugged his shoulders. "Yuh can ask him. I don't know. Who—who're yuh?"

LANNIGAN said: "I'm just riding around. I've been riding for Double-C but quit. Or I thought I quit, until I saw this. Yuh didn't see the men who did it, did yuh?"

"I—I reckon so."

"Recognize them?"

"No," said The Boy, "they were strangers to Larry an' me. Who—who *are* yuh?"

The Boy drew back. "Yuh—are yuh *Lannigan?*"

"What makes yuh guess that?"

"Ther's talk that Lannigan was at Double-C. Are yuh?"

There was no point in denying it. "Yes," said Lannigan.

The Boy said: "I doan know, I doan know what to do."

"I can tell yuh one thing," said Lannigan. "Get to Double-C pronto and tell them what's happened. I'll stay around. Benson can go with yuh if he's nervous of showing himself here."

"He's not nervous," The Boy said. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no sign of Benson. "I—I would ride, but I can't. My horse has got hisself hurt. Nothing much, but he'll need resting."

Lannigan waved to the horses cropping idly by the edge of the cliff. "There are plenty of horses."

The Boy's eyes lit up. "I didn't realize—sure, I guess that's so. I'll ride." He drew his hand across his eyes.

"I'll ride," he repeated. He went slowly towards the horses, picking up a saddle; all the saddles had been removed before the men had camped. He put it on a horse's back and tightened the girth, doing everything mechanically. Then he forked leather.

Then from the trees came Larry Benson.

Lannigan would have recognized him anywhere. He walked easily, and there was a set smile on his face. On his back was a Winchester and, across it, the guitar. He reached them and nodded to Lannigan, then turned to The Boy.

"Where yuh goin'?"

"Double-C."

"That's an idea. Ride fast."

"I'll ride fast," promised The Boy.

Lannigan said: "One of us should go with him as far as the range. He'll be safe enough then."

"We can guard him from here," Benson said. He touched the barrel of his Winchester, and nodded to The Boy, who kneed his horse and rode off. Soon he was scrambling down the hillside. He rode well. Benson held his Winchester in his hands and they scanned the hillside and the rangeland, but the only things in sight were trees—not many on the range—beeves and grass. It seemed a long time before The Boy reached the bottom. He turned and waved, and then began to gallop. Soon he was out of sight, and Lannigan turned to Benson.

"Why did yuh let the boy come to me alone?"

Benson's smile widened. "Sure, it was a sensible thing to do," he declared. "His hand ain't steady. Mine is. If yuh'd made trouble, yuh would be another body now with me watching. With him watching, yuh might be alive an' I might be dead. Don't that make sense?"

"I guess so," said Lannigan.

"Thanks. Yuh're Lannigan, aren't yuh?"

"Yes."

"Howdy," said Benson. His eyes were laughing. Lannigan had often longed for laughter but had not expected to find it in circumstances like these. He felt angry with Benson, but there was simple good humour on the man's face. He was no fool; he was just not affected by what had happened. He went on: "Ther's a lot've talk about yuh, I guess."

"There'll be more talk about this," said Lannigan.

"I guess." Benson looked down at the men and then up at the birds. Then his glance travelled towards the picks and spades the men had brought with them for the fencing work. "We ought t' get busy," he said.

There was no argument about that. They turned about, picked up the spades, and began to dig. Benson worked with smooth, easy movements. Lannigan, unused to digging, found it more difficult. Half-way through their grim task, Benson looked up and said: "Yuh'd better take it easy."

"I'm all right."

"All the same, yuh ought to take it easy." He stopped himself, long enough to roll the makings, and Lannigan followed his example.

From that moment on, Benson began to talk.

He did not say why he and The Boy had ridden out this far from Arrowhead, but he said that when they had got near the Fall they had heard shooting. So they had rid-

den up through the trees, aiming to find out what was happening. Before they had reached the spot, the shooting had stopped. Six men had ridden, in Indian file, close by them. All were strangers to Ridge City, if Benson could be believed.

"There was one man," Benson said, "an' I didn't like the look of him at-all, Lannigan. He wasn't a big guy. He wasn't so big as me. He was kind've easy to look at. He could ride as if he was part of the horse. He was leading them, and they called him 'Boss'. Do yuh know what I didn't like about him, Lannigan?"

"No. Why?"

"It seemed kinda funny to him," said Benson, "when one've his men said they ought to've burried these fellows. This handsome guy laughed and said the birds would look after them. I didn't like that. Would yuh've done?"

"No," said Lannigan, because an answer was called for. He hesitated for a moment, and then asked: "Why did yuh ride this far out?"

Benson looked up and met his gaze squarely. Then he looked down and went on digging. The grave was almost deep enough now. Minutes passed, Lannigan thought that Benson was not going to answer. It didn't greatly matter. Benson was friendly, it was good not to be alone...

Benson said abruptly: "Mrs. Tandy asked us to, I guess," and then went on digging with his easy, rythmical movements.

11

INTO Lannigan's mind there sprang the picture of Marion Tandy, sitting by his bedside; and then another, when she had come in with thin bread-and-butter, dressed in dark clothes which had thrown into relief the creamy loveliness of her skin. Her face seemed to blot out Benson's. Then the vision faded. Benson was looking at him intently.

"We're deep enough," he said.

"I guess."

They took all the contents out of the pockets of the four dead men. They were trifling things, mostly. One man had a tattered picture of a girl in his belt. There was nothing to matter except a few dollar bills, a few nickels. It was a slow, weary, gruesome task, but at last the earth was flattened down as well as it could be, and Benson began to replace the grass he had cut.

They stood looking at it, their heads bared to the sun.

Benson said: "I guess it ain't often I wish I was a parson." That silly set grin curved his lips. "Yuh haven't got a Book?"

"No."

"Nor'd any of them." Benson shrugged. "I guess no one will worry. I can tell the parson one've these days, he c'n come out if he feels that way." He turned his back on the grave, and with the inconsequential way that Lannigan had come to expect of him, he went on: "Sure, Mrs. Tandy asked us to ride this way."

"Why?"

"Because Tandy had ridden out with two strangers who hit Arrowhead and talked to him." Benson hesitated, and then went on: "I guess Tandy don't often ride alone these days. I guess Mrs. Tandy was worried for him."

Benson knew differently: Marion had wanted to know where Tandy had ridden and why. So Arrowhead was divided, those for Tandy, those for his wife.

Benson said: "Yuh know I once rode for Double-C?"

"Yes."

"An' I've often wished I was back," said Benson. "I was kind've stubborn, I guess. I didn't object to riding this way. I planned to ride as far's Double-C an' find out if ther' would be a welcome for me if I come back. The Boy wouldn't join me, but that didn't matter."

"Why wouldn't he move from Arrowhead?" asked Lannigan.

Benson said: "Something would keep him ther', I guess. Yuh don't

have to worry about that. It doesn't signify. Lannigan, I've heard plenty about yuh from Double-C talk in Ridge City. I guess if Jem Grant says yuh're okay, yuh're okay. Yuh know that yuh're wanted, don't yuh?"

"Yes."

"D'yuh know why?"

Lannigan thought it better to say "No."

"Because Tandy would like t'see yuh dead," said Benson. "There's no other reason, I guess."

"It seems a mighty poor one."

"Yuh don't know Tandy," said Benson.

He talked a little more, and all he said confirmed what Long Pat had told.

"I wish I'd been earlier," he said. "Yuh make anythin' of it, Lannigan?"

"Not yet," said Lannigan.

Benson shrugged. "We'd better eat," he said.

THERE WAS a dark mass, far way, moving slowly, or what seemed slowly. Realization of what it was ran through Lannigan like a shock. Benson saw him, and turned to look in the same direction. The dark mass *was* moving. It was impossible to pick anything out, but to men of the range that moving mass could mean only one thing.

Benson put it into shrill words: "Them's beeves on the move!"

Lannigan nodded.

"Plenty of beeves," Benson added, sharply.

"Too many beeves," Lannigan said. "They'd be Double-C cattle."

"I guess."

"Being herded to the river," Benson said, now in a soft, gentle voice. "Ther's the ford around that spot, Lannigan."

"How far from the beeves?"

"Twice as far again as we are."

"They're going to be driven across the ford," Lannigan said. "There can't be any doubt about that." He got up slowly. The thing was almost too big to allow him to think clearly, but there was a pattern, if he could only see it. A few beeves rustled and then a great herd was driven across the range towards the river and the ford. Rustling on a scale which had died out in most places. Beeves stolen, not in tens but in thousands. The dark mass was no nearer, but it seemed to take on shape now, and he judged that, being eight or nine miles away, those beeves were moving some. So they were being driven hard.

Benson said: "We can't do a thing!"

"We can try," Lannigan said. "Yuh ridin'?"

"Yuh're crazy!"

"I'm going to try," said Lannigan.

"Ther'll be all've ten men driving that herd."

"They're driving up from the south-east," Lannigan said, "and if they're in a hurry they won't worry about strays. They'll stay at the back. They won't know we're comin', the beeves will hide us. We *can* do something, Benson."

Benson said: "Okay, I'm crazy too."

With the decision, they acted fast. One moment they were staring towards the herd, the next they were in the saddle and riding down in the path which The Boy had taken. They reached the flat land. From there they could not see the beeves, but they did not need anything to guide them. Benson had a bigger horse than Lannigan, but rode no faster. They went at a full gallop, with the sound of hoofs and the falling water in their ears all the time. Gradually, the Falls faded in the distance, but another sound took its place—the deep distant thunder that came from a moving herd of cattle. Then they saw the mass no more than three miles away.

Benson said: "Yuh were right, I guess."

"Seems like." Lannigan looked towards the river. He could see the ford—he had seen it only once before. It was between them and the herd, and they were nearer. A dozen men, perhaps many more, were hidden by the beeves.

Benson asked: "What's yuh're idea?"

"Head the beeves off," said Lannigan.

Benson sighed. "Yuh surely are crazy, Lannigan."

But he was smiling, rather like Pete had smiled after he had been wounded and when Black Joe was on the ground.

IT COULD work both ways.

Those beeves were maddened. They had been driven far and hard under a hot sun, and they didn't like it. Now and again, above the thunder, there was a sharper sound of a shot. Yes, the men at the back, still unseen, were in a hurry.

The chance, Lannigan reckoned, was that he and Benson could head the herd off, turning it in a half-circle and away from the ford. If that happened, if the whole herd turned, then the men behind would not be able to stop them for a long time. They would have to herd them round gradually, and it would take hours. If they came straight on, without turning, they would go across the ford and reach the other side without trouble.

Lannigan began to shoot into the air.

He and Benson kept on the river side of the herd. They were dangerously close to the water; if they went in and that great mass of cattle followed, here would be no chance at all of coming out alive.

The cattle were coming straight on—

For what seemed hours on end but was in fact only a few minutes, Lannigan and Benson roared and shouted and fired into the air, sometimes jostled by beeves on the outside of the herd, sometimes in imminent danger of being thrown. And they were being forced nearer and nearer to the river. Lannigan grew hoarse and was tired, the whip seemed heavy; its throng seemed to have no effect on the beeves. They were forced nearer and nearer to the water, there was no way of escape that way.

Benson was working like a madman, but twenty, not two, men were needed for this—or else a miracle. Lannigan's lips were turned back over his teeth as he fought on. A steer jostled him and the piebald slipped.

"Finish," thought Lannigan.

The piebald struggled up on all-fours again. The steer had gone past. There were a few moments of dreadful pressure; the herd was like a solid wall against him. He could not see Benson.

The pressure eased.

At first Lannigan did not realize it. He was gasping for breath, bellowing and shouting, flashing out the whip. His guns were empty, but he did not think of what that might mean later.

The truth flashed into Lannigan's mind like water on to a parched tongue. The herd was moving away from the river. He was not more than twenty yards from the bank. A few beeves had strayed and were in the water, but the great mass was heading back, back to Double-C land, back—

Benson wasn't down, he was behind him! He touched Lannigan's shoulder and pointed towards the river. Lannigan realized what he meant, knew that he was pointing to their only chance. The men who had driven this herd would soon appear.

Lannigan nodded.

With Benson, he turned and rode the few yards to the river. The bank was not steep there, the broad bosom of the water stretched peacefully and invitingly to the other bank. Further down a few beeves were struggling in it, that was all.

They reached the water.

He had never tested the piebald in water. He felt the horse give an involuntary shiver; he shivered too. Then water splashed over the horse's raised head, into his face, over his whole body. The current was faster than he had hoped, and he felt the piebald lose footing. But the horse gathered himself and regained it. Then it began to swim, with Lannigan firmly in the saddle. Not many yards from him, Benson's horse was swimming smoothly.

There were three men on horseback by the water's edge. There were others, riding after the cattle; he was

not worried about those others, only about the three on the bank. They held guns.

Then he heard the first shot.

12

ONE SHOT was followed by others, in quick succession. Lannigan saw the splashes in the water, all of them were in front of him, the men had not got the range. They were breathless and unsteady after their ride.

There was another volley of shots. The piebald quivered. "Got him," Lannigan thought.

Yet he would not give up. As the volley died into the silence, he poised himself, then flung himself sideways. The water engulfed him. He kept under for as long as he could, struggling against the current; the men on the bank would guess that he would go with the current and be ready to shoot when he re-appeared. The water gurgled in his ears. He was free of the piebald, but the horse would try to make the far bank on its own and would be in no danger except from a casual shot.

He reached the surface.

There were too many noises in his ears to know whether shooting started. He thought it did; he took it for granted it did. But he stayed up only long enough to get his breath and then plunged beneath the surface again.

He bumped against something hard; a rock. He opened his eyes. Yes, it was a rock, there were many small ones on the sandy bed of the river, but this was larger. This might give him cover. He tried to remember whether he had seen it sticking out of the water, but he could not be sure.

He reached it again, clung to a jagged edge, and dared to raise his head. Shots rang out then. He heard them clearly enough and felt a bullet strike the rock near his hand. He saw, too, that it was above the water. He was on the nearside of it, but it he could get to the other side it would protect him from the gunmen.

He went under again.

He hauled himself round, not daring to let go of the rock for fear of being swept away by the current. When he looked up again he saw not the opposite bank nor the bank where the men were standing waiting, but a bare face of rock close to his eyes. It was between him and his assailants, so he still had a chance.

He looked down river. He could see the bank. The piebald and Benson's horse were on the far side. He could not see Benson. He heard another burst of shooting. He dared to peer round the rock, saw that the three men were still in the saddle and on the bank.

They were shooting further downriver.

He glanced round again, and saw Benson, half-submerged, on his back. Did that mean Benson had been fatally hit? He watched, tensely. The man's body seemed to be floating. The men on the bank no longer fired, but scanned the river closely.

He looked at the far bank. It was still a long way off. He dared not swim for it yet. He looked back at the men. *They were riding away!*

He drew in a deep breath, then turned and swam towards Benson. Suddenly, he saw Benson's head move. Benson was raising his head, trying to see the near bank.

Lannigan called: "They've gone!"

Benson did not hear him.

Lannigan swam towards him as the Arrowhead man tried again to raise his head. He was foxing, and foxing well, for when he moved it looked as if the ripple of the water made him. Benson's head turned abruptly, however, when Lannigan splashed near him. He opened his mouth, and water flowed gently into it. Benson gasped and, as his tension relaxed, began to struggle. Promptly he went under water. The last glimpse of his face that Lannigan saw was so funny that he laughed—and water trickled into his mouth in turn.

AT LAST they came up, side by side, treading water. The river just here was seven or eight feet deep. At the ford, it was less than two feet, Lannigan knew.

"Which side?" asked Lannigan.

"Far," gasped Benson.

"Do we need to?"

"Safer," said Benson.

He was right, and in any case they had to go there for their horses. They swam slowly. Benson was making heavy going of it. When at last their feet touched the bed, Benson lurched and would have fallen but for Lannigan's support.

"Right leg," Benson said. So he was hit.

"Badly?"

"Guess not."

Lannigan helped him to struggle on to the far bank. They were a hundred yards further downstream than the horses, which were grazing peacefully. There was no shade near the bank, but plenty a little way in. Lannigan whistled to the horses, and the piebald started, Benson's followed. Then he helped Benson to walk to the nearest patch of shade.

The Arrowhead man sat down with a gasp. "That's better."

Lannigan looked at the wound. The bullet had gone through the fleshy part of the thigh—right through, so there was no danger of the lodged bullet causing complications. It was the only wound they had between them. He dressed it, using their kerchiefs and a strap. The bleeding had practically stopped. Benson rolled the makings philosophically while he was going through the ordeal, then grinned.

"Them rustlers were mad," he said. "We made it. I still don't believe any one could be so crazy as yuh an' get away with it, Lannigan."

Lannigan laughed. "It helps to be crazy."

"It sure helps yuh."

"I wonder what happened to the rustlers," Lannigan said, thoughtfully. "They could have finished us if they'd come after us, and they needn't have ridden off."

"Scared," said Benson. "They were in a hurry from the first, yuh remember that."

"I suppose so," said Lannigan.

Then he jumped up, remembering that the piebald had flinched once when in the water. The horse was not troubled now, but there was a long score running across its hindquarters. It was not deep, and the river had washed it clean. It was as well for him and for Benson and the horses that the rustlers had been unsteady after their ride. Any one with a steady hand could have picked them off.

His clothes were wet and uncomfortable. Benson was lying with his eyes half-closed, looking fully satisfied.

"I reckon I'll dry my clothes," Lannigan said. "Shall I dry yuhrs?"

"Mine'll dry on me."

Lannigan stripped and spread his clothes out in the sun. Within an hour they would be bone dry. He looked at the gentle surface of the river. It was cool and inviting, quite untroubled. Without thinking, he waded in, knee deep, and then plunged forwards. It was good to feel the cool water caressing his skin. He swam up river for a while, then turned on his back and floated down. As the water run off his glistening skin, Benson called out: "Yuh're surely *plumb* crazy! Some one might've come."

"They didn't," said Lannigan.

"They're coming," Benson said.

Lannigan turned sharply and looked across the river. Way off, so that it might have been a speck in the sky, was a rider. He watched for some minutes and then saw others. There were two or three in all—three, he decided. He went to feel his clothes. They wanted a while yet and the riders would not get here for another twenty minutes. He helped Benson back into the shade and the cover of a tree further from the bank, then called the horses and tied them so that they could not stray and be seen by any one on the far side. Then he picked up his clothes, joined Benson, and began to dress. They could hear but not see the riders now.

Benson said: "I would be a durned sight happier if I had me a gun that would work, I guess."

"We may not need guns," said Lannigan.

In his heart he felt sure that the rustlers had returned and were going to make a thorough search of the river. He finished dressing, then examined his gun and Benson's two. They were dry enough, but needed oil. They couldn't have oil. He loaded them, and gave Benson one. "I'll borrow yuhr second, I guess," he said, and Benson nodded. "The Winchester won't be any use to us," added Lannigan, casually. "I guess not. Take a look-see," pleaded Benson, "maybe yuh'll be able to recognize them."

Lannigan went forward carefully. He could see the riders, close by the river now. They were riding slowly towards the ford. None of them were looking in his direction. He parted the boughs of a tree and looked across.

His heart leapt. "There's Long Pat!" he exclaimed, and he left cover in a flash, put his hands to his mouth and *yippeed*. Long Pat, Pete and one other Double-C rider were on the far side, and they all turned with a start—and all put their hands to their guns.

Then Pete recognized him. "That's Lannigan!" His elated voice travelled clearly across the water. "Yuh okay, Lannigan?"

"I'm okay! Come across."

The others did not hesitate. In a few minutes they were on the far bank, their legs wet, but otherwise they were dry enough. They climbed down from the saddles as Lannigan met them. He told them about Benson, and by that time they reached the man. Benson grinned up at them —and in his hands, his fingers crooked and ready, was his guitar!

"Can't get no sound out've it," he declared. "The strings are finished. That's sure hurt me bad. Howdy, Pat, Pete, Roger." He nodded to all three in turn.

Long Pat punched him gently in the stomach.

"Mind my leg," said Benson.

Lannigan was studying the Double-C men closely. One thing came to him: they were too light-hearted in the circumstances.

NOT UNTIL Lannigan had talked did they know that he and Benson had turned the herd.

They did not know about the murders.

That fact gradually dawned on Benson, whose smile grew more set. The others remained in high sprits because several thousand head of beeves had been saved. They planned, they said, to spend the night out here.

"What I can't understand," said Pete, "is what Rozzy an' the others up on the ridge were doing."

"Huntin'," said Long Pat, laconically.

Benson looked appealingly at Lannigan. "Tell them," he seemed to say. Lannigan's face was set. Long Pat and the others, at last sensing that something was wrong, watched him closely. He turned words over in his mind, and then decided that there was only one way to talk. He said: "Rozzy and the others were killed, I guess."

The three men stiffened. "What's that?" croaked Pete.

"Before I arrived," Lannigan said. "Benson knows more about it than I do. We sent The Boy"—obviously they all knew whom he meant—"to tell yuh. Yun must've missed him."

There was a long silence.

The men from Double-C looked towards the Ridge. It was easy to imagine what they were thinking. It was difficult to speak, to break the silence they had imposed upon themselves. He watched Long Pat's face. There was no lurking humour in his eyes, now.

Then abruptly he turned to Lannigan. "Yuh still feel like quitting?"

"No," said Lannigan.

Long Pat seemed to relax. "That's more like it," he said. "We-all had better get to the outfit. There's just a chance that there's been trou-

ble that way. I doubt it. I reckon them rustlers have made for the Ridge, they won't want to be around on the open range again."

All of them got up. Benson was helped into the saddle, and said he could manage to ride. Lannigan knew that the subject of the murdered men would not be discussed again, except when Grant was being told. But it would never be forgotten. The feud was no longer beneath the surface. Double-C would force it to the open.

He was committed to their side.

13

STANDING in front of the ranch-house, Grant was talking to Ogden. Lannigan rode in with the others, but went round the back of the bunk-house and kept out of sight. He could hear snatches of what was being said. Benson kept breaking in on the ranchers and the sheriff, with words like: "If it wasn't for Lannigan, yuhr cattle would've been gone, I tell yuh." Or to Ogden: "If yuh spent yuhr time out on the range, the way yuh should these yer days, ther' wouldn't be trouble." Ogden was irritable and bad-tempered. He questioned every man in turn about the rustling, and appeared to think that it had been greatly exaggerated. Lannigan, squatting in the shadow of the bunk-house, listened with only half his attention. There in the corral were five horses, just brought in. Ogden had not even troubled to find out why only four men had appeared.

The sheriff was no good. That did not necessarily mean he was bad—but either he was bad as a man or just plain foolish.

Reluctantly, Ogden promised that he would get a posse together and comb the Ridge hills.

Jem Grant said hotly: "If yuh're so unwilling, Ogden, I'll do it myself. Maybe yuh would act differently if yuhr men had been killed in cold blood."

"I'm not unwilling," Ogden said. "I know my business."

"Yuhrs—or Tandy's."

Ogden did not answer. Lannigan could imagine the way his face darkened. Soon there was the sound of riders making off. Lannigan watched them come into sight. They did not once look round, but headed for Ridge City.

He joined the others.

Benson was saying: "So I'd like to come back, Boss."

"Yuh're welcome," Grant said. "Is The Boy staying with yuh? We can use him."

The Boy was standing nearby. He looked tired and sick. But at the words he stirred and said: "No, sir, I'm going to Arrowhead. I belong there."

"Suit yourself," Grant said, and lost interest in The Boy.

Long Pat said: "He can't hit that trail alone."

"Sure I can," said The Boy. "I'll ride out soon. I just need to rest, that's all."

"Go an' lie on one of the bunks," said Long Pat.

They settled Benson in a room in the house. He was cursing his uselessness, but swore that he would be about again in a matter of days. Lannigan could believe it of the man. His second reason for cursing was the loss of the guitar, which had been ruined in the water. That seemed to hurt him more than anything. But he grinned when he was left alone, and promised not to keep complaining. Lannigan had helped him undress, and now joined Long Pat and Grant in the office. Long Pat had finished talking, Grant was about to answer. He looked round at Lannigan and pointed to a chair.

"Thanks," said Lannigan.

"I've got to thank yuh," Grant said. "I've heard enough to make it clear that yuh saved several thousand head of beeves for me. The way yuh acted made all the difference. And I guess if yuh were Corliss, yuh would have acted differently. This man Corliss—is he leading the rust-

lers, I wonder?"

"Could be," allowed Long Pat.

"Benson talked of a handsome man," said Lannigan. "Smallish, dark, wiry, I gather."

"He told us," said Grant. "Yuh think that's Corliss?"

"He was the leader of that particular bunch."

"I guess so." Grant put a hand wearily to his forehead.

"Where do we go from here? We've eight men left—eight and Benson, who won't be any use for a while. We can't do much. We haven't had enough men to look after the beeves properly, that's proved now. How many men are there in the Ridge hills, I wonder?"

"I wouldn't put it less than twenty, from all accounts," said Long Pat.

"And there are Double-O men," Lannigan said.

"We've got a man-sized job," Grant said, slowly. What he meant, thought Lannigan, was that he had a job he did not think they would be able to handle. He could see, or thought he could see, that. If the odds were reckoned in man-power, he was not far wrong. Eight men against thirty, and there was no likelihood of getting any more help. It came to Lannigan that by saving that herd he had done no more than postpone the disaster—for disaster was what Grant expected. So, he thought, did Long Pat. It would not have been so bad had Ogden been less hostile; but of his hostility there was no reasonable doubt.

Long Pat said slowly: "How're we goin' to start?"

Lannigan put his hands palms downward on the table, and said slowly: "I can think of one way."

"What's that?"

"Get hold of Tandy."

The others stared at him as if he were mad.

"We never could do it," said Pat.

"How would it help?" demanded Grant.

"Yuh're dead sure he's yuhr man, aren't yuh?" asked Lannigan.

"Dead sure."

"Then if we kept him here for a while, he couldn't give orders. And his men wouldn't want to come here and cause trouble because it would be trouble for him. There's one thing we haven't found out for certain," he added. "That's about Corliss. Ogden seems to be after Corliss, but is he in fact. Isn't he really after me?"

"What's yuhr point?" asked Grant.

"A simple one. Are Corliss and Tandy working together or are they opposing each other? This is a prosperous part've Texas for Tandy. I can understand the small things, to upset yuh, but the attempt to get those beeves over the river wasn't small. That was big stuff. Is it what Tandy wants? He knows that if there were much trouble like that, he would have the Federals here, and they would come in strength. They won't allow big rustling to last for long. I can figure out Tandy fighting yuh and yuh Tandy, what I can't figure is Corliss's part in it. Are yuh following me?"

Jem Grant's frown grew lighter. "Yuh've got something, Lannigan." He came nearer to smiling than Lannigan had yet seen him. "And we could get Tandy if we went about it the right way."

"I'm beginning to like the idea've this," said Long Pat, and his face brightened. "Tandy stays at Arrowhead with only a few men around him because he reckons himself safe. There's Tim Morely, not strong enough to do much, The Boy—and we can start out ahead of him, he won't be in the saddle this side of sun-up to-morrow. Benson's here. That leaves only Cray to make trouble. He's got sense. I think it could be done to-night."

"That's talking," said Lannigan.

"No killing," said Grant.

"No killing—until we find out a thing or two," said Long Pat. "If we can prove Tandy's behind to-day's trouble, maybe he will get lynched."

Grant said firmly: "I won't have lynching, I won't have Tandy hurt. There are two ways of fighting, and one's the wrong way. I won't have it."

"We won't do anything to cause more trouble," Long Pat assured him. "The way for Tandy to go out is after a trial. I was joking."

"I don't like that kind of joke,"

Grant said, and then relaxed.

"Do yuh need me for it?"

"No," said Lannigan, "the fewer the better. Long Pat an' me would be enough, I reckoned."

"Yuh agree, Pat?" asked Grant.

"Surely."

"Ride out when yuh like," said Grant. "I'll tell the others yuh're going out for me. No one else need know until yuh come back. With Tandy, I hope. Yuh can get everything fixed at the store, Pat."

"Surely," said Long Pat.

THERE WAS spring in his step as he led the way out. He did not go immediately to the corral, to get the horses, but to the store, where a black boy was nodding. The lad jumped up.

"Get me enough food for two days for two people," Long Pat ordered, and, when the boy had hurried off, he went on in a whisper: "Lannigan, yuh've surely put new heart into me. I couldn't figure a way we could do anything. Yuhrs was the simple way and, by crack, we'll make it!"

"Do we need to ride the city trail?" asked Lannigan.

"Nope. We can give the city a miss and go a shorter way," Long Pat said. "Lannigan, I'm looking forward to this!"

"We haven't got Tandy yet," Lannigan reminded him.

Pat laughed. "We'll get him," he said, "we'll get him!"

"How long will it take this way?" Lannigan asked.

"Four hours to hit Arrowhead," Long Pat told him.

"An' what're the chances of being seen?"

"Small. Nearest outfit to this trail is Double-O. If my reckoning's right, they'll be working on the other side. An' it will be dark in an hour," Long Pat added, reassuringly. "I don't see that we've got anything to worry about. It sure was an idea," he added, and laughed again. There was a good note in that laugh, this man needed action to stimulate him. "We can be back before sun-up—with Tandy!" He laughed again.

Lannigan wondered if it would be so easy.

They rode at a good pace over the rolling countryside. The evening was cool, the coolest they had known for months. Summer was beginning to loosen its grip on the land. Then night was upon them; the heavens were bright with stars.

They had not brought Winchesters. He hoped they would not run into trouble.

On and on they went until, after a period of silence, Long Pat said: "I guess we'll feed here."

"No fire," said Lannigan, warningly.

"I've ridden the range at night before," Long Pat said ironically.

It was good to get out of the saddle, to walk up and down, and water the horses at a stream which Long Pat had known was handy. They ate cold bacon and bread and washed it down with water.

A LITTLE way ahead, Long Pat said they would climb a hill from which they could see the lights of Double-O, only a mile or two away, and the dimmer lights of Ridge City. He was right.

"It's a good sign when a small town doesn't pull its curtains," Lannigan remarked.

"Let's hope it stays that way," said Long Pat. He chuckled. "I think it will, after to-night!"

He was not contemplating failure, but Lannigan now felt doubts about his idea.

After another long silence, they crossed a stream. "We're on Arrowhead range," Long Pat said.

"How far's the ranch-house?"

"Four-five miles."

So they would not be long now. Lannigan peered about him, imagining shapes where there were none. The quiet of the night was unnerving. At first, Long Pat had hummed gently, tunefully, but he was not humming now. On they went, until suddenly a light shone in the distance.

"Arrowhead," whispered Long Pat. "We going to keep together, I take it?"

"I guess."

"An' we'd better muffle the horses," said Pat.

He had brought strips of blanket for the purpose, and they fastened them about the horse's feet, then forked leather again and rode on. The light grew brighter. All was quiet—almost too quiet. Lannigan tried to tell himself that he was making fears out of the air. But he was nervous, more nervous than he ought to be. There was something the matter with him. There was—

Marion Tandy!

He knew, then, why he was jumpy; he might see her again. He *wanted* to see her again.

His jumpiness left him. He was smiling in the darkness by the time he made out the shape of a window. That was the moment to get down and lead the horses, he reckoned. They got down and crept forward, soundlessly, and Lannigan was staring at the lighted window and wondering whose room it was.

14

TIM MORELY sat on a big log, his hands cupped about his chin. Cray stood against the side of the Arrowhead bunk-house, thumbs in his belt. The fire was burning brightly, crackling sending a few fiery sparks towards the heavens, but apart from that there was no noise. Two of the windows of the ranch-house showed lights, the big room, where Tandy was probably sitting, and the smaller room—Marion Tandy's. The big room had windows on both sides, and it was a light from that which the two approaching men had seen.

Cray ran his fingers over his stubble. "Yuh feelin' worried, Tim?"

"Sure." Tim took his hands away and looked over into the heavy, sombre face of the thick-set puncher. "Sure. I never did think the time would come when I would want to hear that guitar. It ain't natural. Why they been so long?"

"An' Tandy back since midday," Cray said.

"I don't like it."

"There's a lot I don't like," said Cray.

Tim sighed. "Sure, I do *miss* that guitar," he complained. "Yuh comin' with me?"

"No, I guess I'll stay here."

Tim walked off, on his nightly stroll. Even the fact that there was nothing to "get away from" could not break him of the habit. He wandered towards the gate, where he often saw Marion Tandy.

A white blur came out of the blackness. He started—and then recognized Marion. "Ma'am, yuh came near scaring me," he declared, in his slow, husky voice.

"I'm sorry, Tim."

"Changin' sides to-night?" he asked, feeling sorry that she had gone where she would not meet him.

"I was coming round here," she said.

That satisfied him.

The light from the big room reached them as they stood there. Had they looked round they would have seen Tandy's head. He was sitting with his back to the window, reading some book or other. From the bunk-house there was the red glow of the fire. A heavy tread inside told them that Cray had decided to get between the blankets.

"It's colder, ma'am," Tim said, "yuh should wear a wrap."

"I'm not cold."

"It's colder," repeated Tim, severely. "Yuh—"

The men moved out of the darkness upon them, swift and silent. They were within two yards of them, yet Tim had noticed nothing, nor had the girl. Tim started to shout, but a hand was clapped over his mouth, his knees were knocked in, he was helpless in the grip of some one unusually powerful. Suddenly a kerchief took the place of the hand over his mouth. It was tied tightly to prevent him from crying out, but a voice whispered close to his ear.

"Yuh won't get hurt."

They took his guns. Then his hands were tied. Struggling was useless; never before had Tim Morely realized

the effect of age. At first he was so bewildered that he gave no thought to anything but his own plight, but suddenly he thought of Marion. He could see her, just a white shape, standing upright—was *she* being handled this way?

The man picked him up as if he were a babe and then laid him flat and helpless on the ground. Then the man went away. There were whispered voices. Tim caught some of the words: "I'm right sorry about this, ma'am, but yuh won't get hurt."

So they were doing the same to her...

* * *

IT HAD gone incredibly well, so far. Lannigan's fears of failure faded. The only regret—and it did not go very deep—was that he had been forced to handle Marion Tandy roughly. Well, not *so* roughly. She had been good, not screaming, not trying to run. The truth was that she had been frightened into stiffness and silence. He knew something of what that was like. She could not recognize him or Long Pat, even had there been more light, because both men had pulled up their kerchiefs. Only their eyes were clearly visible, for their Stetsons were pulled low over their foreheads.

It had been strange, tying up Marion Tandy.

The knots were loose, the bonds not tight, but the scarf about her face had been drawn tightly because they dared not let her cry out. Lannigan sat her on the ground, against a pillar of the fence. The old man was lying near her. Long Pat was looking towards Tandy's head; it was bald except for a little rim of grey at the sides and back.

"Tandy next?" whispered Lannigan.

"Cray, I guess—in the bunk-house. One can handle him. Will yuh?"

"Okay," said Lannigan.

Cray was sitting on his bunk, pulling off a boot. One stood by his side. He was facing the door, and yawning. His great chest, covered with a matt of black hair, was bare; but he still wore his trousers. He got the boot off, put it with the other and pushed them against the wall. Then he took off his belt, with the guns inside, and hung it on a nail above his bunk

Lannigan waited for that moment, then stepped forward.

"Don't move," he said.

Cray stiffened. He looked across to the door and saw the masked figure. His lips opened, then pressed tightly together. Lannigan saw his muscles bunching. Cray was no coward and would not give up without making an effort to turn the tables. But his gaze was on the Colt in Lannigan's hand. The Colt was a powerful argument. Yet he sat there without moving, his shoulders bunched and the powerful muscles of his arms bulging.

"What's this?" he growled.

"Keep quiet," ordered Lannigan. He stepped further into the bunk-house. "Turn round."

Cray faced him defiantly.

"Behave yuhrself an' yuh won't get hurt," Lannigan said.

Cray drew in his breath. He still refused to turn round. He sent one quick furtive glance towards his belt. The nearer gun was within reach if he stretched out his arm, but Lannigan's gun was very steady.

"Turn round!" snapped Lannigan.

Cray drew in his breath again, then stood up slowly. It looked as if he were going to obey—but then he put one leg beneath the bunk, kicked and heaved it upwards. At the same moment, he went for his gun.

Lannigan's mind worked at speed, desperate speed. He wanted no shooting, but if Cray started, shooting would be necessary to save himself. He could have wounded the man there and then. He preferred to try to avoid it. He launched himself forward. Cray's hand touched the gun and was pulled away, but Cray was a fighter. He kicked, caught Lannigan on the shin, then struck at Lannigan's gun-arm. Lannigan was forced to let go. Cray brought his left arm round, encircled Lannigan's neck, exerted a pressure so fierce that for a terrible moment Lannigan was helpless, afraid that his neck would be broken.

His kerchief slipped.

He was pressed there, close against

Cray, who could see every feature of his face. He could see Cray's, the dark eyes glittering, teeth bared.

Lannigan got a grip on Cray's right wrist, and twisted. He had used that grip on Black Joe—ju-jitsu. It had never failed him, and Cray gasped and relaxed.

Lannigan got free, but maintained his grip.

"I don't want trouble," he said. He increased his pressure, Cray was forced to turn round. Lannigan struck him sharply on the side of the head with his gun, which he picked up from the bunk. One blow was enough. He let the man fall and straightened up, breathing hard.

He tied Cray's wrists and ankles, then gagged him. By that time Cray's eyes were opening. He stared at Lannigan, who felt uneasy again, for the first time.

He went out, across the yard, into the big room. He remembered being carried across it on the night when he had been forced to leave here.

Tandy was standing up, by the fireplace. For the first time he and Lannigan came face to face, although Lannigan had his kerchief up again. Tandy looked at him—and Lannigan had a peculiar feeling.

Tandy was not afraid.

This man was old and looked frail. His face was lined—a strong face, perhaps, but so lined that no one could be sure. The only young thing about him was his eyes. They were clear blue. There were fleshy bags beneath them and the lids were pouchy and puckered, but the eyes themselves were all right, and they showed no hint of fear.

Long Pat asked: "Yuh all right?"

"Cray saw me," Lannigan said. "We had some trouble."

"That's bad. We'll make Cray ride with us."

Lannigan said: "We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"We can't leave the girl and old Morely on their own."

Long Pat looked nonplussed.

"I guess that's so," he conceded doubtfully.

"Yuh can take her along with you," Tandy said unexpectedly.

His husky voice carried nothing of its usual harshness, perhaps that was succeeded in startling both the men, how nervousness affected him. He went on: "She can ride as well's any man. She might meet up with trouble if yuh leave her alone with Morely."

"That's so," Long Pat said, "but—"

Lannigan said: "What Tandy wants is what we don't want, that's clear. We'll leave Cray."

He was glad that he had made the decision. He saw disappointment in Tandy's eyes, although still there was no hint of fear. Tandy looked resigned. He certainly did not look like a man in the process of being kidnapped.

"Let's go," said Long Pat.

He motioned with his gun to Tandy, who went slowly towards the door. Soon they were on the verandah, Long Pat ahead, Tandy next, Lannigan behind him.

As they walked, they heard hoofbeats in the distance.

15

A POWERFUL bunch of riders heading for the ranch-house—some were a long way off yet, others were nearer. It was possible to pick out the sounds, to know the indications. The nearest men were within a five minute's ride, Lannigan thought, and they still had to get a horse for Tandy, or else make him ride in front of one of them. That would slow them down; they would have to hurry now.

Tandy broke their silence.

"I ask yuh to take my wife." His voice was harsh, and there was a quiver in it; now he knew fear, but it was for his wife, not for himself.

"We can't—" Long Pat began.

Lannigan said: "Who's coming, Tandy?"

"I don't know."

"Yuh've an idea."

"It might be—" Tandy hesitated, and then went on with a tone of finality, "a bunch of outlaws."

"Headed by who?"

"A man named Corliss. Yuh're wasting time."

Only then did Lannigan hear the sounds behind him—horses riding fast but muffled, riders who might only be a minute's ride away. They had to act. He snapped. "Take Tandy on my pony, I'll follow."

"But—"

"Move!" hissed Lannigan.

There was no time to unfasten Marion Tandy and get her away before the riders with muffled horses came up. He was aware now of the possibility that there were muffled horses coming from more directions than one. He looked right and left, but could still see nothing but the lights of the ranch-house and the dying fire.

Long Pat's horse and the piebald were still muffled, they might get away unheard, but—

Before he reached the fence, riders were near the bunk-house. He saw three at least. One man flung himself from his horse. He plunged something into the fire. There was a sudden flare, a red and yellow flickering glow.

There was a small shed near Lannigan. He leapt towards it. In the red glow, he saw the girl's face. She was badly scared. So was Tim Morely, whose eyes were turned towards the torches and who was struggling desperately to free himself.

Lannigan reached cover and drew his guns. The light was not yet good enough for him to recognize any of the men who had ridden in. The others were approaching, he judged there were at least twenty riders in all. One or two rode in from every direction, menacing dark shapes in the red glow.

Then a man called out: "Tandy! Where are yuh?"

Something in the quality of that voice went through Lannigan.

Then he saw the rider who had called out; he was calling again: "Tandy, come out've there!" He appeared near one of the flaming torches. The red glow gave to his face a devilish beauty; beauty was the only word. Into Lannigan's mind there flashed memory of Benson's description of the man who had laughed at leaving the Double-C riders to the carrion birds. This was the man, he felt sure of it; it was probably Corliss.

The man swung himself out of the saddle and ran towards the ranch-house. Two others followed him. Lannigan could hear them stamping about the place, flinging open doors. Then, almost at the same time, one man found Cray and another found Marion and Tim. Their shouts brought the handsome man out of the ranch-house. Once again Lannigan saw him clearly, was taken by the devilish handsomeness, the red glow was almost hellish—

This was crazy thinking!

A man said: "Mr. Corliss, I've found Mrs. Tandy. She's okay."

So it *was* Corliss; and his men treated him with rare respect. *Mister* Corliss! Lannigan watched. Corliss stared towards the speaker. Marion was on her feet now, a man was untying her gag. Then Corliss said something which ran through Lannigan's mind and body like fire.

"We're too late."

There was savage anger in the man's voice, but that was not the thing that affected Lannigan. "*We're too late.*" Corliss had come here knowing there was a risk that Tandy would be gone, so he had been forewarned of the attempt to kidnap the old man.

Some one had overheard the talk at Double-C; that was the only possible explanation.

Some one said: "Maybe they're headin' for Double-C right now."

Corliss said: "They won't be that dumb. But make sure. Five-six of yuh hit that trail. Get there fast and get their first. Get Tandy." He turned towards Marion, walked to her and, in the curious light, Lannigan saw this man's face again and was struck by its evil as well as its handsomeness. He stood in front of the girl. She was leaning against one of Corliss's men, while others were untying Tim Morely. Marion looked so frail and yet so lovely and appealing that Lannigan, who could just

see her, felt his heart thumping uncomfortably fast.

"So yuh're Marion Tandy," Corliss said. "Go an' change into ridin' clothes, and be quick about it."

Morely, released now, was holding on to the fence. He was immediately opposite Lannigan who could see him full face.

Tim said: "Yuh needn't take her, she—"

"Keep yuhr trap shut," Corliss said, harshly.

"But—"

Corliss shot out his fist. It connected with Morely's jaw with a sound like the report of a six-gun. The old man sagged at the knees, then fell. Marion made an involuntary movement towards him, but the men by her side stopped her.

"Get moving," he said. "One man by the door, one by the window, in case she tries to get out. An' look around her room, first, she might carry a gun."

He turned away, and Lannigan moved back into the shadows.

Corliss went across to the bunkhouse, and talked to Cray. Cray answered mostly in monosyllables, and said that although he had seen one of the kidnappers, he did not know who it was. Lannigan could just hear their voices; he thought he detected a note of dislike in Cray's. Certainly the man did not spread himself to be vicious about his earlier assailant.

Corliss left Cray. The man had a cold, impressive competence. Every one jumped to his orders.

Lannigan stood and made himself think.

Corliss and his men had taken it for granted that all of the kidnappers had ridden out. There was no search of the buildings or of the corral. He was in a hurry to get off, and would have been on the trail by now but for Marion.

Corliss was talking again. A man had asked what he was to do with the old man—Morely.

"Leave him," Corliss said. "Leave the other buzzard, too. They can tell Ridge City what happened. It's time the city began to understand what's coming to it." He laughed again. "Where's that woman?"

A man called out: "She's comin', Boss."

"Make her hurry." Corliss was fidgeting now. He snapped his fingers. A small dark horse came towards him. He forked leather with easy grace and sat watching. The others also forked leather. Marion came from the ranch-house with two men. A horse had been saddled for her. One of the men started to help her up. She pushed him aside, and Lannigan's eyes narrowed at the sight of the way in which she forked leather. She looked very small in riding clothes.

Corliss laughed. "Sure, yuh're some dame. Yuh can have the honour've riding with me."

She did not speak to him, but sat staring ahead of her.

An impulse seized Lannigan.

The girl and the outlaw, riding off; perhaps she would never get free, there was a danger that he would not be able to follow successfully.

His gun was in his hand.

He felt his finger tighten. He could shoot Corliss without trouble, the man was an easy target.

Lannigan's forehead was running with sweat. He checked himself. He hardly knew why. Partly, perhaps, it was because Corliss had no chance: he found it hard to fire at an unwarned man, it was like shooting some one in the back. That was training and inherent character, but it was not the only thing. There was danger enough already. If he fired, the men would not leave until he had been hunted down. It would not help the girl.

His hand was unsteady, but he took his finger away from the trigger. That was one impulse conquered. The men started to ride off, Corliss and the girl in the lead.

Corliss called out of the darkness: "Put out those lights."

The men were passing water-butts. Corliss had noticed them and knew they had the opportunity; it was indicative of the almost uncanny efficiency of the man. On his words, the flares went into the water-butts. They hissed and danced and then went out, leaving the whole place

in darkness but for a faint yellow light from ranch-house and bunkhouse. The noise of the line of horsemen—fourteen of them, including Marion—faded away into the night.

Lannigan turned. "Keep where yuh are," said Cray, from behind him.

16

LANNIGAN kept quite still.

Since the riders had gone, he had been careless and moved out of his hiding-place. Tim was stirring on the ground, now and, Cray was behind him. He judged from the man's voice that he held a gun.

There was a shuffle of footsteps. Was Cray going to knock him out, leave him—

"Turn around," said Cray.

Lannigan obeyed, slowly. Cray was standing just in front of him, with a six-gun in his right hand. He shot out his left and pulled the kerchief from Lannigan's chin. Lannigan was in the light, now, Cray in shadows.

Cray grunted. "I thought so."

Lannigan said: "We've got to follow Mrs. Tandy."

"Have we?" asked Cray.

Lannigan said slowly: "Yuh know we have. D'yuh recognize me?"

"No."

"I'm Lannigan."

Cray's eyes, as far as Lannigan could judge in the darkness, widened in surprise. Lannigan moved a little. Cray raised his gun, but did not speak at once. He followed until they were both in the light.

Then Cray said: "Yuh an' Corliss are supposed t'be the same."

"We're not," Lannigan said. "Cray, I think Tandy's deep in the trouble we've been having. I wanted to talk to Tandy. I didn't plan to harm him, any more than I harmed yuh or Morely. There's a chance, just a chance, that we can keep Tandy from Corliss and also get his wife back."

Cray said: "I wonder."

"One of us follow Corliss, and the other hit the Double-C trail," Lannigan said in an urgent voice. "I don't care who takes which one, but that's got to be done. Tandy's being taken to Double-C. There will be a raid once that is known. If yuh want to help Tandy, yuh must realize that it's got to be prevented."

Morely stirred on the ground. "What—what's that?" he croaked.

"Stay quiet, Tim." Cray did not move his gaze from Lannigan. "Yuh take it easy. Say that again, Lannigan."

Lannigan said: "There isn't time to waste. Corliss and the others are all of two miles away by now. We can catch up if one've us starts now. If we wait five-ten minutes more, we won't be able to catch up."

Cray said: "I guess not."

"D'yuh want to help the girl, or—"

"Did they—did they take her?" This was Tim Morely again. He was on his feet. His eyes were hurt-looking, but not dazed. There was a trickle of blood at his chin, coming from a cut in his mouth. "Did they?"

"Yeh," grunted Cray. "Lannigan says—"

"*Lannigan*!"

"We're wasting time we'll never catch up," Lannigan said, desperately. "I want one of us to go after Mrs. Tandy, the other after Tandy, who's heading for Double-C. I—"

Tim said: "Cray, I reckon yuh an' Lannigan had better go after Corliss. I'll take Double-C. Sure, sure I'm all right," he added, when Cray started to protest in his slow way. "I heard what Lannigan said before. Who's gone with Tandy? Long Pat?"

"Yes."

"He's no fool," Tim said. "He'll realize that it wouldn't be wise to return to Double-C right away. I guess I know two-three places he might hide out until he's had time to look around some."

"Are yuh all right to ride alone?" Lannigan asked, doubtfully.

"I can ride," said Tim. "An' maybe one day Corliss will find out I can punch." His voice grew sharper. "Get after Marion Tandy," he said. "Hurry!"

Cray said: "Okay."

IN TEN minutes, he and Lannigan were riding horses with muffled hoofs and making a fast pace in the wake of the outlaws.

They came to some uneven country. Cray said: "They went round. We'll go across this. We might reach the ridge before they do."

Lannigan said; "That's fine."

"I'll lead," Cray said. "That horse can give yuh all it's got an' it won't be enough."

He went ahead. Lannigan kneed his horse and followed blindly. It had to be blindly. He was amazed increasingly at Cray's knowledge of the trail

Suddenly Cray called out: "We're going up the ridge. Make it careful."

Had they reached the ridge already? Lannigan had thought it miles away. For the first time it occurred to him that Cray might deliberately have led him on the wrong trail.

He got out of the saddle and hesitated, hearing little noise above him, now. Cray had reached the top, he thought. Ought he to follow? "I'll take a chance," he decided aloud.

Before long, while he was half leading, half pulling the horse, he heard sounds above him. A few small stones fell past him. He peered up, and saw a man outlined against the stars. Then he heard Cray say: "I'll give yuh a hand."

There was no need to doubt Cray's goodwill.

Between them they got the horse to the top of the ridge. Lannigan thought it was the end of the journey, but Cray said: "Even if that horse drops dead, we've eight miles to do yet."

"I don't follow," said Lannigan.

"We're the wrong side of Ridge City," Cray told him.

So that explained the short time in which they had reached the ridge. Lannigan nodded, gave his horse a five minutes' breather, and listened to Cray, who talked in slow, disjointed sentences. By coming over the rough patch of land they shortened the journey by some miles, but Corliss and his men had a start which would offset their advantage. By now, Cray reckoned, Corliss's men would be within a couple of miles of the ridge, but at a point where it would take them some time to climb up.

Cray said: "They'll come up one-two at a time, I guess."

He was trying to say something else. Lannigan, forking leather again, wondered what. Cray need not have thrown out that casual statement for the sake of it, and he was not a man to use words for words' sake. "They'll come up one-two at a time." That drew a picture of riders leading their horses up the steep slope. Not easy—

An idea flashed into his mind.

He was riding alongside Cray now, and raised his voice: "If we get there first, can't we get Mrs. Tandy?"

"Maybe," called Cray.

"That is yuhr mind?"

"Could be,"

Then Cray said: "We're near. Yun can slow down."

The horse was trembling when it slowed to walking pace, but continued to carry him.

Cray said: "We may's well get down."

They walked along the trail for a while, and Lannigan was glad to give his horse the rest. He was looking downwards. They were near the edge of the ridge. The trail was grassy and little used.

HE NOTICED one thing. Sounds travelled clearly. They disturbed a coyote and heard it slinking off into the night. It was strange to be able to pick out such noises.

Then he heard others coming out of the black void. Horses.

Cray said: "We've done it." As much as his hard voice could, it registered satisfaction.

"They sound close," whispered Lannigan.

"They're down below," said Cray. "They're stopping at the ridge."

He was right. It was possible now to pick out the sounds of horses champing, men talking, other riders coming up and getting down from their saddles. The noises suggested

that the men were only a few yards away. In fact, they were thirty or forty feet below, on the Double-C trail from Ridge City.

"Back a bit," Cray said, and as they moved he added: "What'll we do?"

"Yuh any ideas?" asked Lannigan.

"They'll come up one-two at a time." Cray said. "They'll send scouts. That would be sensible."

"We could handle those scouts."

"Maybe. It's a risk. We don't want them to ride off with Mrs. Tandy."

Lannigan said slowly: "I guess not."

Men were starting up the ridge, on foot. Their approach was audible, although there were moments when there was hardly any sound at all. The bunch of men below were now much quieter.

Lannigan whispered: "We'll tackle one man each, an' call back it's okay. That should be the others. And we want fresh horses—that is, I do. Can yuh manage with yuhrs?"

"Yeh."

"We need one, then—and after that, we want Mrs. Tandy. It shouldn't be so hard, if we have the luck."

"We'll need the luck," Cray remarked.

Yes, thought Lannigan, no one had ever wanted it more desperatley. He waited tensely. The men drew nearer. He took off his hat, went down on his knees and peered over the edge. He could just see shrubs growing out of the side of the ridge—and then caught sight of someone moving. One man was almost immediately beneath him. He waited. The other came in sight, a little further along.

He drew back and whispered the information.

They backed away a little further and waited, until the men had come over. They straightened up and looked about them. They stayed for a moment. Obviously they were listening intently for any sound. some tell-tale noise that might give watching men away.

They seemed satisfied, and one called out: "It's okay."

Hardly had the word left his mouth than men began to move below. Horses were coming up this time, also. Lannigan crept forward, his man singled out. The fellow was standing and looking down. Lannigan crept within a yard of him, and then leapt. Cray leapt almost at the same moment. The two outlaws went down with hardly a sound. Lannigan rolled over, got his hands about the other man's neck—and then the fellow rolled again.

As he moved, and Lannigan was forced to move with him or loosen his hold, Lannigan realized that they were rolling closer to the edge.

17

DID NOISES travel down as clearly as they travelled upwards? Lannigan knew that if they did, his chances of springing a complete surprise were gone. He fought desperately to keep away from the edge and to stop his man from struggling. A knee came up into his groin, and he drew in an agonized breath, but held on. All the time, his hand was seeking the man's neck; and suddenly he found the right spot and pressed hard with his thumb.

The man relaxed.

A great figure loomed over Lannigan. For a moment he thought Cray had lost, that one of the outlaws was here—and then Cray leaned forward and squeezed the outlaw's neck. Lannigan, rolling clear, heard the choked gasp.

He stood up, breathing heavily, trying not to let his gasping sound too loud. He realized, then, why the approaching men had not heard the struggle. The noise they and their horses were making drowned every sound at the top of the ridge. They were so confident, now, that some were even talking to their horses.

They heard Corliss speak.

"We won't be long, my lovely."

Cray stiffened. That 'my lovely' could refer to Marion. The voice

came from almost immediately beneath them. Lannigan and Cray, hats at the backs of their heads, six-guns drawn, peered down.

They could see the men and horses now. Three or four horses were close to the top. It was a horse which came over first—and Lannigan, realizing what the scouts would have done, pulled their leathers, helping them over.

No one could recognize them in this darkness, except from their voices.

The horses stood shivering after the great effort. Men clambered over, and none of them seemed eager to get into the saddle yet. Corliss came over, immediately in front of Marion Tandy. He was speaking to her in the same jeering fashion as at Arrowhead. She did not answer. Cray and Lannigan, standing near could just pick out her figure and face.

Cray nudged Lannigan. "I'll get my horse," he said. "Yuh pick one out."

Lannigan nodded.

There was a big horse near him. The men had gathered together in a little crowd, now, apart from Corliss and Marion. Corliss got down and said: "We can rest a while here."

"I have no desire to rest," said Marion.

Corliss asked: "Okay, okay, my beauty? Yuh stay there. It won't help yuh none."

He did not go far away from her. He lit the makings, and in the sudden flame of the lucifer, Cray was clearly illuminated. Lannigan was able to pick out his features. If any one else did that their hope was gone.

No one did.

Cray and Lannigan were on the outside edge of the crowd of men and horses. Corliss and the girl were obviously left on their own by intention, and while most of the men were on foot, it would be folly to make a move. Lannigan worked the situation out calmly. He felt Cray's uncertainty, knew the man would do anything that was asked of him except lay plans.

There was a hum of conversation, loud enough to drown his voice as he said: "The moment we-all fork leather, we'll ride at Corliss and Mrs. Tandy. Shoot only if need be—if we can stop them from shooting for ten-twenty seconds, we may get out of range. We don't want Mrs. Tandy hurt."

"That's so," said Cray.

"I'll go to the left of her, yuh to the right."

"Okay."

"I'll start her pony off," Lannigan said.

Cray nodded. They stopped talking, watching the vague, shadowy figures of the other men. There were fourteen or fifteen, Lannigan reckoned; all those who had left with Corliss were here. There were two or three couples, isolated from the rest, as were Cray and Lannigan; so they were not conspicuous.

They wished things would start moving.

Whenever a man approached them, they prepared for trouble, but no one showed any real interest in them. One or two men passed and grunted something, they grunted back. Cigarettes were glowing in a dozen places, and once or twice Lannigan heard the clink of bottles.

Suddenly Corliss called out: "We'll ride."

Any doubt that Lannigan might have had of the man's absolute control over these outlaws was dispelled. They sprang into the saddle like a well-drilled patrol from an army group. One moment they were standing, smoking, talking and drinking, the next they were ready to ride.

Cray whispered: "Now?"

"Now," said Lannigan.

In front of them, only twenty feet away, was Marion Tandy. Between her and the two men was Corliss, but he was a little to one side. Behind them, the whole bunch of riders.

Now!

THEY WENT off together, their horses shocked into action. One moment they were on the edge of the crowd, the next they were at Marion's side. No one moved or spoke. Even Corliss seemed shocked into inaction. Lannigan shouted: "Ride with us, Mrs. Tandy!" so clearly that she must have heard. Then Lannigan slapped

her pony across the flank. Quick as he was, Marion had kneed her pony first. It was already on the move, her mind was as quick as a flash.

The thunder of the hoofs broke the quiet of the night. Then, adding to the noise, came a shout from Corliss and the bark of six-guns. Bullets whistled pass Lannigan, who did not know if either of the others was hit. Cray was leading, Marion following, Lannigan bringing up the rear. They had gained twenty yards before the shooting and the shout. Was twenty yards a big enough start?

Corliss was shooting, horses were on the move, but the riders had been bunched together, they had not a clear run and they lost more ground. Straining his ears to tell one sound from another, Lannigan caught the beat of one galloping horse not far behind him. He did not turn round, he could not have seen any one had he done so, but he knew that Corliss was following, and he guessed what Corliss would feel like.

There was more shooting, but only from one gun this time—Corliss's gun. The other men were saving their fire, and perhaps were discouraged because they might hit their leader. Lannigan bent low in the saddle. He could not see either of those in front, and trees were on either side, seeming to close in on the trail.

More shooting—

He glanced round and saw the last of six shots, a flash which just showed him the figure of the leading rider; he was still sure that it was Corliss. He judged that the man was reloading his Colts. He drew his own, turned in the saddle, losing a little speed. Another shot was fired at him. He fired fast, the spurts of flame showed him to the outlaw, but there was no answering fire. He heard nothing, saw nothing, but after a few seconds he realized that there was no one leading the outlaws. Corliss had either stopped or been shot from the saddle. The din of galloping hoofs was still loud, but the men were probably fifty or sixty yards behind him; they had a start which ought to see them safe.

He concentrated on getting more speed out of his horse.

He wished he had the piebald, but could not complain about the effort the 'borrowed' pony was making. He actually gained on Cray and Marion. He could see them now, for they had come through the patch of trees and they were visible against the star-speckled sky. Cray was leading, and his knowledge of the country was so good that Lannigan did not worry about the immediate future.

Cray called back: "I'm turning right."

"Okay," called Lannigan.

Suddenly Cray's figure disappeared. Then Marion's went out of sight. As Lannigan turned, he realized that they had hit another trail, one leading towards the hilly, wooded land beyond the ridge. It was good country in which to get lost. He was tense with eagerness now. The trees through which they were riding hid everything and muffled sound, but he could hear the thud of the chasing outlaws. It seemed to sound in his ears for a long time until suddenly he realized that it was getting further away!

There was no doubt about it; Cray had tricked them.

Cray was slowing down. He let Marion ride alongside him, and then called in a hushed voice: "We'll turn left, then stop a while."

"Okay," said Lannigan.

They turned left almost at once. It seemed even darker here than it had on the main trail. He looked up, and saw why. The tops of great trees were close together, and they seemed to blot out the stars. Only a few shone here and there, and about them was the shadowy darkness of a thick wood.

"This'll do," Cray said.

They all stopped, and sat, breathing hard. Cray seemed tongue-tied Lannigan sensed that the man wanted to speak but could not find the words. Marion was breathless. Lannigan waited a few moments, and then said:

"I guess we were lucky."

"Lucky!" exclaimed Marion. "It was—"

She broke off. Lannigan did not

think it was because she was breathless. Something had made her break off, some discovery which startled her. He could not guess what.

Cray said: "I'm mighty glad, Mrs. Tandy."

"And I am, Cray." She was not surprised at hearing Cray, and for a moment that puzzled Lannigan Then she went on: "I saw you when—when that man lit a cigarette. I hoped it would mean something—like this. Who—" she paused again. "Who is with you?"

"Lannigan," said Cray.

LANNIGAN did not know why he felt so certain; but he was sure, in that moment, that the girl had stopped speaking, a little while back. because she had recognized his voice. The thought warmed him.

"I can only say, to both of you—thank you." Her voice was husky now; she was almost overcome with emotion. Lannigan thought that she was beginning to realize the full gravity of the situation from which she had escaped. Reaction was setting in. He heard her teeth chattering, although it was not really cold.

"Aw, ma'am," said Cray, helplessly.

Lannigan said: "We've got to start some quick thinking, I guess. We've got to get out of here, we haven't much time to waste. Any chance of them returning this way, Cray?"

"Not along here," said Cray. "They may hit the other trail and pass the end of this one. We'll know in ten-fifteen minutes. This ain't really a trail, it's a clearing. Not many would know of it."

"Yuh seem to know the whole country," Lannigan said. He was eager to get Marion Tandy's mind off blacker thoughts.

Cray gave a harsh little laugh. "I was huntin' in these hills when I was as high's yuhr knee," he said. "I guess I know it. But there's one thing I don't know."

"What's that?"

"Where to go now."

Lannigan said: "We shall have to stay awhile in the hills."

"With Mrs. Tandy—"

"I can take anything you can," Marion said, quickly.

Cray muttered: "It's not that easy, ma'am. An' we're without food, unless ther's some in the pommel bag've yuhr hoss, Lannigan. An' by day, they might find us. If I know Corliss from what I've seen've him to-night, he'll spend most of to-morrow looking around. We can be traced here in daylight. In three-four hours it will be sun-up."

That was the longest speech Lannigan had heard him utter. Every word of it was good common sense.

"Isn't there an outfit we can trust?" Lannigan asked.

Cray said: "No," quite definitely.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause, and then Marion spoke more quietly than before:

"I don't know why you are worrying," she said.

"What's that?" asked Cray, startled.

"We can go into Ridge City," Marion said. "There will be no danger there. Ogden will ride out to find these men."

Lannigan stared at her in the darkness—and then he chuckled. She was dead right! There was no place for her so safe as Ridge City—

Cray said: "Trouble is, ma'am, Ridge City an' Lannigan aren't exactly friendly."

18

SHE ASKED: "Why is that?"

Lannigan had not realized that she was unaware of the situation in the county, although as she put the question he knew that she should have been. He explained, briefly. She made no comment, except to say. "Then we can't go there."

Lannigan said: "I don't see why not."

"Yuh're crazy," exclaimed Cray.

Lannigan laughed softly. "Not so crazy. We're not all that far from the town. I guess we can take Mrs. Tandy

in and see that she's with friends—yuh've friends, I guess."

"Yes," said Marion.

"And there's no reason why yuh shouldn't stay in the town for a day or two," Lannigan said to Cray. "Yuh can report to Ogden and tell every one else worth telling what has been happening. By talking of my part in to-night's ride, yuh can make Ogden realize I'm not so black as he thinks. Also, yuh can make it clear that Corliss is some one else. There's a chance that Corliss is badly hurt," he added hopefully.

"I reckoned that," said Cray.

"Any further objection to riding into Ridge?"

"I guess yuh're right," said Cray. "Thing is this, Lannigan. Yuh've been ridin' hard most've the day. Yuh need rest. An' yuh don't want t'be worried in case yuh're discovered by Corliss." He paused, then added awkwardly: "What I'm trying to say is, yuh shouldn't be in these hills on yuhr own right now."

Marion said: "Doc Jordan would give him hospitality."

"Why, sure," said Cray, in a tone of surprise. "Sure the Doc's okay. Sure, that's what we'll do. Where'll yuh go, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Pardoe's," said Marion.

It occurred to him that they might as well get out of the saddle, for a rest. All of them got down. He helped Marion. He felt her warm flesh through the sleeve of her coat. For a moment she rested against his body. Then she drew back.

"Thank you," she said. They stood for ten minutes, without speaking, but listening.

Cray said: "That's that, I guess. We can ride."

"It's possible they've left one-two men on the trail," Lannigan reminded him.

"Not the trail we're goin' to hit," said Cray, confidently. "I guess we'd better muffle the hoofs, Lannigan. We don't want to ask for trouble."

Soon, they approached the outskirts of the city. They were riding three abreast. Suddenly, Cray drew ahead. There was no one about, no lights in any of the windows. They made little noise as they rode along.

He glanced sideways at Marion and realized she had been looking at him.

She looked away quickly.

Cray slowed down until they caught him up. "I guess we'd better hit the doc's first, ma'am, an' get Lannigan safe."

"I agree," she said.

"Doc's always being called up, in the night," said Cray, as if for once he needed words with which to reassure himself. "There'll be no trouble."

They reached the doctor's shack. Cray tapped on the door, softly at first, then more loudly. It seemed a long time before the door was opened by Jordan himself. He carried a candle, and looked at the three people in surprise, then exclaimed: "Mrs. Tandy!"

"Doc—" began Cray.

Lannigan interrupted. "It's Lannigan," he said. "Can yuh hide me for a day?"

There was only a moment's pause, before Jordan said: "Sure, sure I can. An' yuh, Mrs. Tandy?"

Marion said: "I'm going to Mrs. Pardoe's, Dr. Jordan."

"Yuh'll be all right with her," Jordan said.

It was so easy, so simple. Lannigan felt a deep gratitude towards the fat doctor. He turned to look at Marion, and saw her hand stretched out. He took it.

"Good-night, Mr. Lannigan," she said, "and thank you—thank you so very much."

Then she turned and Cray went with her.

Jordan said: "I'll take yuhr horse, Lannigan. Will it be recognized?"

"I don't know. I've borrowed it from men who ought not to have any right in Ridge City," Lannigan returned.

"I see. Yuh get inside," said Jordan.

LANNIGAN stepped inside. Jordan took the horse to the

stables at the back, leaving Lannigan alone in the room, with the light of only one candle. He remembered the other rooms. There was Hannah Jordan's and, along the passage, Beulah's.

He heard a door open. In a moment, Jordan appeared, after locking the back door. He was dressed in an old robe, tied tightly about his fat middle, and his sparse hair was standing on end. "Yuh'd better have yuhr old room, I guess," he said.

"Yuh're mighty good."

"I like to help. Can yuh use coffee?"

"Well—"

"Come an' tell me what's been happening, while I warm it," Jordan said.

He did more than warm coffee. He cut ham and bread, put butter, knives and fork on the table, lit another candle, and then sat down while Lannigan talked and ate.

He finished eating and the story almost at the same time.

Jordan said: "That's quite a story, Lannigan."

"Corliss has got to be stopped," Lannigan said.

Jordan nodded. "I agree, I couldn't agree more, but if Corliss and Tandy are working together, it won't be easy. I can't understand Tandy. I know he's been working for a long time to get the whole of the county under his control, but this doesn't tie-up. His working against Grant does—that doesn't surprise me at all. I told yuh before, Tandy's mean. But I can't see him tying himself up with a man like this Corliss."

Lannigan said: "Maybe he couldn't help himself."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning this," said Lannigan. "If he's been working against Jem Grant, arranging a little trouble here, some rustling there, he might have employed Corliss. He would not know that Corliss was getting men together, waiting until he was strong enough to take over from him. Tandy might have started this in a small way and, when it got big, found himself outwitted and helpless. The fact that he went off from Arrowhead with two riders—probably Corliss's, because they were strangers—suggests he was compelled to do it. Without compulsion, he wouldn't have left his wife."

"There's sense in that," Jordan agreed.

"It would explain, too, why he seemed relieved more than anything else when Long Pat and I raided Arrowhead," Lannigan said. "He had only one worry then—his wife. He was mighty anxious we should look after her."

Jordan chuckled. "Well, yuh have!" he said. "Now I guess yuh'd better get some sleep, Lannigan. Yuh're lookin' all in—and the wonder is yuh're on yuh're feet. Yuh're not human," he added, and there was a laugh in his voice. "Yuh ought to've been dead before yuh reached me the first time!"

Lannigan smiled. "Maybe that was delayed only a little while, he said. "Doc—"

"Huh-huh?"

"Are yuh wise to let me stay?"

"I guess not," said Jordan, "but yuh're staying. Maybe by the time Cray's finished spreading the story and Marion's added to it, Ogden won't feel so sore. I shouldn't worry about anything but getting sleep. Beulah and Hannah"—it was odd that he put the servant first—"won't talk. I'll tell them to let yuh sleep as long as yuh like, an' to find some food when yuh wake up. I shouldn't leave the little room in daylight. Yuh might be seen from the other windows; yuh won't be seen from there."

He got up, and led the way to the door.

HE DID not know how long he had slept, but it was high daylight when at last he woke up, warm and comfortable. He heard the sounds from the Main street, the city was well awake, so it was middle morning. He heard Beulah bustling about in the main room, then silence. So she had gone into the kitchen to prepare

the mid-day meal. That proved how late it was.

There was water on the tiny dressing-table, and a glass. He rinsed out his mouth, wishing he had his kit with him. He shrugged his shoulders, washed, then dressed slowly, lazily. At last he was ready. He rolled the makings, but wished that Beulah would come into the main room so that he could ask for some food.

He heard her at last and called out. She hurried to open the door and beamed on him.

"Why, Massa Lan'gan, it's sure good to see youse again, it sure is. Youse hungry?"

"Mighty hungry," Lannigan assured her, warmed by the welcome. "And it's good to see yuh, Beulah."

"Ah won't be two shakes gettin' youse a meal," Beulah promised. "I sure won't!"

She brought in a small table, which made it almost impossible to move in the little room, and then piled it high with food. Broth first, then a roast of beef with golden brown potatoes and peas. He ate with a will, finishing with apple pie and cheese, and when Beulah came in her eyes lit up at the sight of the empty plates.

"Ah sure like a man who can eat his vittles," she declared. "Youse a much better man than youse were, Massa Lan'gan!"

Lannigan chuckled, and, replete, rolled the makings and lit up. He sat in a small chair, his back to the window, although it overlooked only the countryside beyond the township, and he had not seen a man or woman all the time he had been awake.

With the windows open it was pleasantly cool.

He had been smoking for ten minutes when he heard horses approaching. There were two riders. That did not worry him, even when they stopped outside the door of the doctor's house. He heard the men get out of the saddle. They were talking, and he distinguished Doc Jordan's voice. Then a door opened and the men came into the big room. Jordan was still talking, although his words were muffled and Lannigan caught only one here and there. He assumed a friend had come in, or else a patient.

Then the other man spoke, and Lannigan recognized Sheriff Ogden's voice.

19

LANNIGAN put out his cigarette against the fireplace and wafted the smoke towards the window. If Ogden smelt tobacco smoke even a man with limited imagination would know that Jordan had a visitor.

The voices of the two men were clearer, now. Ogden was saying: "Well, that's happened, Jordan. According to the black boy at Arrowhead, there were at least a dozen riders who came and took Tandy away."

Jordan said: "It's bad, Sheriff."

Lannigan thought: "The boy was so scared that he got the facts mixed. Ogden doesn't realize there were two lots of people at Arrowhead."

"It's mighty bad." There was a querulous note in Ogden's reedy voice. Lannigan thought he knew why. Faced with a situation graver than anything he had ever known, and without the active guidance of Tandy, the man was lost—perhaps frightened. "I can't understand it anyway," Ogden went on. "According to Cray, this man Lannigan helped him to rescue Mrs. Tandy from the riders. It doesn't make sense. I was sure in my own mind that Corliss an' Lannigan were one an' the same man but both Cray an' Mrs. Tandy say there are two of them."

Jordan said nothing.

Ogden said: "An' that's not all. There was that man murdered out on the trail near the ridge. I reckoned it was Lannigan. But I've just been talking to The Boy from Arrowhead."

Lannigan instantly remembered the youngster who had ridden off to carry the first news of the mas-

sacre of the Double-C riders.

"He's been at Double-C," declared Ogden, "and according to him, none of the Double-C riders think it was Lannigan. Fact is, they know it wasn't, because Lannigan was around Double-C all've that day. It wasn't right've Grant to tell me he wasn't when he was, but—" Ogden broke off, in indecision.

Jordan asked: "What would yuh do if Lannigan was to walk right in here now?"

"There's nothing I can do," Ogden grumbled. "I've got nothing to hold him on now, I guess."

"It looks mighty bad to me," Jordan said, rubbing salt in the sheriff's wound. "Yuh've been after Lannigan when yuh should have been after Corliss. Who told yuh that Lannigan and Corliss were one and the same? Was it old Tandy?"

Lannigan stiffened.

Ogden said: "No, it wasn't Tandy."

Ogden went on: "It was Hamilton."

"Hamilton of Double-O?"

"Yeh." There was a sound, as if Ogden had dropped into a chair. "He seemed sure've himself, I guess. I can't rightly understand why he told me if he wasn't sure."

"Maybe he had his reasons," Jordan said. "It wouldn't surprise me if funny things started to happen from now on."

It was some seconds before Lannigan realized that the last remark was a hint, an invitation to show himself. Other things were adjusting themselves in his mind. Two in particular needed much concentration. Hamilton and Black Joe had wilted when he had told them he was Corliss; and they had spread the story that he *was* the outlaw. In a confused situation, Lannigan saw some things clearly. Hamilton and the Double-O foreman had not known the real Corliss in person, but had worked for him. He had instructed them to identify him with Lannigan. Then, at the meeting near the trail, they had been completely bewildered when Lannigan had flung out that challenging statement.

No wonder they had been taken aback!

Then Lannigan heard Jordan repeat: "Sure, mighty funny things might happen, Sheriff."

"There's been more'n enough of them already," said Ogden.

LANNIGAN smiled and relaxed. He picked up his belt and put it on, then tapped on the door and thrust it open. He saw Jordan first. The fat doctor was sitting back in a chair that looked too small for him, and was glancing toward the door. He smiled a welcome. Then he saw Ogden, leaning forward in his chair, gripping the arms, flabbergasted at the sight of him.

There was a long, tense silence.

Ogden said: "Is—is that *Lannigan*?"

Lannigan smiled. "We met at a distance, I guess, Sheriff. Sure, I'm Lannigan."

Ogden turned to Jordan, dazedly. "Yuh—yuh've kept him here, knowin' I was looking for him?"

"Not quite that," said Jordan, comfortably. "He rode in late last night, after rescuing Mrs. Tandy. I decided he was worth keeping until yuh came along." He managed to wink at Lannigan without Ogden noticing it. "Yuh've got nothing against him now, have yuh?"

Ogden gulped. "No—no, nothing at all."

"Yuh don't know how pleased I am to hear yuh say that," said Lannigan, warmly. "I don't like riding off from the sheriff of any township." He sat on the arm of a chair, smiling at Ogden. "Things aren't so good around here, I guess."

"They—they're mighty bad," Ogden said.

"What do yuh plan to do?" Lannigan asked.

"I've got no ideas," Ogden admitted, helplessly. "This man Corliss appears to have a big bunch of riders. I could get together a posse of ten-twelve deputies, I guess, but they're mostly old timers. An' there's three-four we could maybe get from Arrowhead."

"And there's Double-C men," Lan-

nigan reminded him.

"Sure, there's Double-C." Ogden hesitated, then threw up his hands. "I guess the truth is I don't know who I can trust an' who I can't. If I could talk to Tandy, maybe he could help, but Tandy's been mighty strange lately."

"In what way?" asked Lannigan, swiftly.

"This way an' that," said Ogden. "It's his wife, I guess. Yuh know one thing, Lannigan? Tandy's hasn't ever been the same man since he got married."

"I think there's something in that," Jordan said.

"Maybe if we asked Mrs. Tandy—" Ogden suggested, and then seemed to realize the folly of the remark. "Maybe she could tell us who's reliable," he added, weakly.

A sheriff in his own district wondering which men were reliable and which were not!

Jordan said: "Ogden, I've an idea that might appeal to yuh."

"Name it," invited Ogden, eagerly.

"Yuh keep to the township, where there might be trouble," Jordan said, "and appoint a leading deputy to handle the work outside. Two forces are needed," Jordan went on. "Yuh've got to admit that. Yuh can't be in two places at the same time. How does it appeal to yuh?"

Ogden said: "Sure, but who can I appoint?"

"Long Pat?" suggested Jordan.

"He's not around. And I'm not sure've Double-C," Ogden said, stubbornly. "I'm not sure've any one who hides a man from me the way Double-C, hid Lannigan."

"But Lannigan was—" began Jordan.

"What Lannigan was doesn't signify," Ogden insisted. "The thing that signifies is that Grant and Long Pat and the others hid him from me. They didn't know he wasn't Corliss. They could only work on his say-so." The man could be obstinate.

Jordan said: "What about Hamilton?"

"I guess I wouldn't like to name Hamilton," said Ogden. He looked as if he did not understand why Jordon had suggested the little Scotsman. Lannigan thought he knew, but kept quiet. Jordan had some one in his mind, and was leading up to the man slowly. Ogden went on restlessly: "Jordan, these here are facts, I guess. There's big trouble in Ridge County and some of it has been agreed to by some one living in the county. Maybe it's Hamilton, maybe it's some one else, I wouldn't know. But I trust no one out on the ranches, and that's a fact".

Jordon said: "Who do yuh trust?"

Ogden did not answer.

"Like to know someone I trust?" asked Jordan.

"Let's hear the name."

"Lannigan," said Jordan.

Lannigan had been sure that the doctor was leading up to some one, but had not dreamed that he himself would be named. His expression of surprise was at least as great as Ogden's, who looked as if he could not believe his ears. Then he glanced at Lannigan. It turned into a long, deliberate stare, and Lannigan saw some quality in the sheriff for the first time. There was a long silence, before Ogden said: "Why do yuh name him, Jordan?"

"Because he's fresh to the county, he's got no close friends around, he's not worried because he's known this man or that over a number of years," Jordan said. "I think he would make the man yuh need, Ogden, because he's already done plenty. Yuh've heard from Double-C about the herd of cows he saved from crossing the river. Sure, he was with Larry Benson, but Larry himself admits it was Lannigan who really handled that affair. And he rescued Mrs. Tandy. Sure, he's done plenty to make us trust him. I wouldn't look further than him, if I were yuh."

Ogden said: "It's an idea. I'll think about it."

"Do that," said Jordan, and then started up. "But I'm forgetting, the two've yuh can probably use a drink."

Ogden said: "I'll be on my way, thanks." He got up and looked at Lannigan. "Will yuh stay round

town for the rest of the day?"

"Surely."

"Maybe I'll be seeing yuh," said Ogden.

WHEN HE had gone, Jordan got out a bottle of Scotch and, without speaking, poured two generous tots and then added a splash of water. He pushed a glass to Lannigan, and then grinned broadly at him.

"I'm drinkin' to the new deputy," he declared.

"Whoever it may be" said Lannigan, and drank.

Jordan laughed. "Yuh've got the job! I've been busy this morning, Lannigan. There are two-three people whom Ogden likes to talk to when he's having trouble he can't get over himself—and I've talked to those people already. They agree with me. We badly need some one from the outside to work on the ranges. Ogden can work in town, I guess, but he's not a man when there's big trouble, and big trouble is brewing in Ridge County. I wish I knew how big. What d'yuh make of it, Lannigan?"

"Right now, I'm too confused to pass an opinion," Lannigan said.

"I guess I can understand that," Jordan said. "There's no reason why yuh shouldn't try to get yuhr mind clear on some things, is there?"

"I'm trying," Lannigan assured him.

"And there's one man whose part we want to find out pretty quick," Jordan said. "That's Tandy's."

"I'm hoping he's still with Long Pat."

"So am I, but there's another way —now and again, by accident I guess, Ogden isn't so far wrong. Yuh ought to see Marion Tandy."

Lannigan looked at him steadily. "How will that help?"

Jordan said: "I've a feeling that she will talk more to yuh than to anyone else, Lannigan. Don't ask me why. Maybe it's because yuh're new to the district. I talk more free to yuh than I would to most people. Will yuh go and see her?"

Lannigan said: "I guess I'd better."

20

HE WALKED along the sunlit main street, knowing that many people were staring at him curiously. Whether they knew who he was, or whether they stared because Lannigan was a stranger and there were many rumors of trouble, he did not know.

Mrs. Pardoe's was not far from Doc Jordan's. It was in the next turning off the main street. Jordan had told him a little about the place and Mrs. Pardoe. She was a widow who had run Pardoe's Hotel on strict lines ever since her husband had died, thirty years before. She welcomed anyone who did not drink too much and who could be relied upon to behave themselves. The toughest riders in the county, Jordan had said, were mild and tame when they went to Mrs. Pardoe's—

It was quiet; the food was good; the whisky and the wines and beer of good quality. Mrs. Pardoe herself stayed in the saloon most of the day.

She had a manager who looked after the hotel, and the hotel itself was the best run in Ridge, Jordan had said. Most of the men who came in with their wives or their daughters stayed at Mrs. Pardoe's because her place was a byword for respectability.

He reached the saloon and hesitated. There was a separate entrance to the hotel. He decided to go into the saloon, which was comfortably full.

Standing near the bar was a tall, severe-faced woman dressed in black. Her dark, luxuriant hair was piled high on her head. She had a fine presence, and Lannigan guessed at once that she was Mrs. Pardoe.

He approached her and she waited for him, knowing he had singled her out. He took off his hat, and in-

clined his head.

"Are yuh Mrs. Pardoe, ma'am?"

"Yes," she said. "If yuh want a table, yuh—"

"I've eaten, ma'am, thank yuh. At Doc Jordan's. I am looking for Mrs. Tandy."

The woman's eyes narrowed. He did not think it was with suspicion, but it was certainly with interest.

"Yuhr name?" asked Mrs. Pardoe.

"Lannigan."

His inquiry had aroused interest; his statement created a stir. But Mrs. Pardoe relaxed.

"Come with me," she said, and turned and led the way out of a side door.

There was a passage leading to the street in one direction and to a flight of stairs in the other. Mrs. Pardoe led the way up the stairs. Her gown rustled. Her step was firm and quick. She reached a landing and opened a door marked *Drawing Room*. The first thing Lannigan saw was a piano, the next was Marion Tandy, sitting on a sofa by the window.

She started when she saw him.

"This is Mr. Lannigan," said Mrs. Pardoe, "and he wishes to talk to you, Mrs. Tandy." The old woman turned to Lannigan, and there was a surprisingly soft expression in her eyes. "I've heard what happened last night, Mr. Lannigan, and I guess all of Ridge is grateful to you—especially Mrs. Tandy."

Lannigan said: "There was nothing else I could do, ma'am."

"Maybe not, but you did it well," said Mrs. Pardoe.

Then she went out.

LANNIGAN had expected her to stay, as chaperon. Now that he was left alone with Tandy's wife, he felt oddly uncomfortable and ill-at ease. There was grace in her movements, grace which added to her beauty; and she was lovely. How she had succeeded in keeping at bay the effect of the fierce Texas sun Lannigan did not know. Her face glowed with health and yet was not burned brown.

Her eyes were violet; how clearly he remembered them!

She seemed as embarrassed as he, until suddenly she laughed, a light, pleasing sound. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Lannigan?"

Lannigan relaxed. "Thanks," he said, and sat opposite her.

"I'm very glad to see yuh looking so well, ma'am."

"I look much better than I would have done had you not come after me last night," she said.

"That was nothing, ma'am, I—"

"I think it was a little service," she said, lightly, and he was glad that she could laugh. Then her tone altered and she became serious enough: "A service enough to put me always in your debt, Mr. Lannigan. Is there any way I can help you?"

Lannigan said: "As for debt, ma'am, I repaid a little of what I already owed yuh and Arrowhead. Yuh're forgetting that, I guess."

"You owed us little enough," she told him. "You were sent off before—"

"Before I outstayed my welcome, and I was glad of that," Lannigan said. "I shall always be grateful for the way yuh—and the others—looked after me, ma'am. I wish I had been able to say so before."

Her eyes were sparkling again. "Are you asking me to call it even, Mr. Lannigan?"

"If that pleases yuh, yes."

She laughed. "Then we shall do that."

"Thank yuh," said Lannigan, and then thought of the reason for his visit.

He said slowly: "Ma'am, yuh know that there is much wrong in Ridge City and County, I guess."

"Yes."

"Yuh know, also, that Cray and I came after yuh last night. What yuh don't know is that I was with the men who first came and I've an apology to make for that, ma'am. I guess I handled yuh more roughly than I intended."

He was quite sure that she was not surprised. "I thought it might

have been you," she said.

"To find out what was happening, I wanted to talk to yuhr husband," he said, "and I did not think he would talk if I called on him in the ordinary way. For that reason I planned to take him away—and I'm hoping that he is safe and that I shall be able to talk to him soon."

"Yes," she said.

"Before that, ma'am, it occurred to me that yuh might be able to tell me something of what he already knows."

"I know little about his affairs," Marion declared.

"A little might help, ma'am."

"I don't think it will." She was clasping and unclasping her hands all the time, uneasy now that the subject had changed.

"Something was troubling him. You *know* that."

He said again slowly: "Yuh know what, ma'am."

"You seem very sure," she said.

"Do yuh deny it?" asked Lannigan. "Do yuh deny, ma'am, that yuh know something of what was troubling yuhr husband? Do I have to tell yuh that it might be of great importance. Yuh know what happened last night. Yuh know that there is a large and powerful party of outlaws in the district. And yuh know, also, that they came to try to prevent me from taking yuhr husband away. They are the simple facts, ma'am."

"Yes," she said, in a low voice.

HE WENT on: "It is obvious enough to me that some one overheard the arrangements which were made to take Mr. Tandy away. As obvious, Corliss came to prevent that. He was afraid of what Tandy could say. That seems reasonable, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

"These outlaws are desperate men," Lannigan went on. "They have killed and will kill again. It seemed to me that they are likely to make an attempt to take control of the county long enough to loot and pillage it. Yuh may say I am guessing, ma'am, but such things have been done before. It is wrong to have a strong party of such men loose in the county, and right that all of us should do all that we can to find out what they are doing, to hunt them down, to kill or expel them. If yuh can help in any way, yuh should do so."

She did not comment on that.

"It is a fact, ma'am," went on Lannigan, "that two nights ago, two riders came to Arrowhead and Tandy went off with them. Yuh sent Larry Benson and The Boy after him. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," said Marion.

"Why did yuh send them?"

No, there was no hostility, but the barrier was stronger than ever.

"Is it too much to ask?" Lannigan demanded.

She said: "Too much, Mr. Lannigan."

"I don't understand why."

"You should," she said.

Lannigan sat with one hand on his knee, watching her. Her composure equalled her bearing.

"Why should I?" he asked.

"Let me ask a question. Why do you expect me to answer?"

Her clear eyes seemed to demand an answer. He gave it to her frankly. She nodded, and spoke quickly. "Do you expect me to tell you anything about that, Mr. Lannigan?"

"Yes, ma'am, if it will help others."

"And perhaps—harm my husband."

Lannigan tightened his lips. He had forgotten, for the moment, how simple things were with people who thought clearly and honestly. She was married to Tandy; she owed him loyalty.

"He might not be harmed," he said, mildly. "There's no proof, even in his ride, that he is working with Corliss. It may look that way, ma'am, but it isn't by any means certain. Before the law takes action, it is certain."

She said gently: "In Ridge County *now*, Mr. Lannigan?"

"Why not, ma'am?"

"With a weak sheriff and some of the riders already mad—shooting mad," she said. "You don't need telling what would happen, surely.

Sooner or later, and to me it looks as if it will be sooner, there is bound to be a shooting war between Double-C, men from some of the other ranches perhaps, and a few of Ogden's men on one side, and the outlaws on the other. The cowmen will be shooting mad all right—you know that. If they had reason to believe that Tandy—" she uttered the name as if it were strange to her—"was with Corliss, would they wait for the law to pronounce a verdict? Or would they resort to lynch law?"

Lannigan said: "None of those I know would resort to lynching, ma'am."

"You are pretending to yourself," said Marion Tandy. "You and one or two of the others might not, but if men like Cray, good though he is, Larry Benson or some of the Double-C riders, if they decided that Tandy was guilty, would they wait?" She paused, and then added: "You know they would not."

"They would if I could make them, ma'am."

Her eyes laughed; it was strange that she could laugh in the middle of such talk.

"I believe you could if any one could," she admitted, "but you are not invested in any authority. You might lead men for a while, I believe you would, but would they respect your leadership enough to do what you told them when they felt the lust of vengeance in their blood?"

Lannigan said: "Maybe not."

"You know they wouldn't," she said.

Lannigan's hands strayed to his oilskin, he fingered the outside, feeling the tobacco squashing up inside.

She said: "Smoke if you want to."

He took his hand away quickly. "No thank you, ma'am." He paused, and then went on slowly: "I can see the force of yuhr arguments. I respect them. But I am going to persist. Will you tell me what yuh think, ma'am, if I give yuh my word that no one will ever hear of it, unless I see Tandy and he admits anything which might be harmful to him?"

21

THE SILENCE lengthened.

As he watched her, Lannigan was conscious of sounds outside the hotel, of carriages bowling along the main street, of people talking, of goods outside the stores clanging or bumping as they were handled. A few riders rode up and down as if some one were on constant patrol. There was even a hum of conversation from downstairs, and two or three times some one walked as far as the landing. From there on their footsteps were muffled by the carpet.

Marion said: "Why should I do that?"

"For no reason, ma'am, except that I ask it," Lannigan said. "Yuh've already made it clear that I am presuming plenty, and maybe yuh're right when yuh suggest that I am getting too big in the head. But I would like to help to clean up this county, ma'am. It needs doing. I've suffered some. People who have befriended me have also suffered. For those reasons, I want to help. The more I know, the more I can help. Does that satisfy yuh?"

"Yes," she said, promptly.

She leaned back, closed her eyes, and began to speak. "I don't *know* the truth, Mr. Lannigan, but I suspect—"

It was as she started to speak that Lannigan heard another sound, just outside the door. Had he not been so intent on her words, he might have acted more quickly, but he lost precious seconds and he did not see the door opening nor the barrel of a Colt poking through. Nor did Marion. She reached the word 'suspect' and then there was another sound, a faint squeak at the door. Marion did not hear it, but Lannigan turned his head sharply. He saw the gun.

He acted fast.

He leaned forward and thrust

Marion back. She had just opened her eyes. One moment she was sitting upright, the next she was falling towards the sofa. At the same time Lannigan jumped up and darted across the room, snatching at his Colt. The door was pushed wider open. He saw a man who was wearing a mask. He saw the six-gun pointed at him, and he squeezed his own trigger. The other man fired. Lannigan had a start, a split-second's start. He heard the cracks of the shots. His bullet struck the other man's gun and sent it to the floor, but the man had the presence of mind to jump back and to pull the door with him. Lannigan might have caught him, but he glanced round, to look at Marion.

There was blood on her shoulder.

She was sitting up now, not hurt badly, he knew that; yet the sight of the crimson patch against the creamy skin made him hesitate. He heard footsteps on the stairs.

The landing was empty.

He saw the man at the foot of the stairs, racing towards the open door. The door from the saloon opened and Mrs. Pardoe appeared in his path. She even stretched out a hand, but the man thrust her aside, and she caused him hardly a moment's delay.

Lannigan leapt down the stairs as men came from the saloon. One made a grasp at him. He thrust the fellow aside, and reached the door. The masked man was already racing across the wide main street, towards a store where a single horse was tied. A man jumped forward from the sidewalk—

The masked man had drawn his other gun, and he fired point-blank.

Lannigan thought: "I've got him," and he raised his gun carefully as the man leapt into the saddle. Along the main street people were shouting, there was a rush for the cover of the stores. The masked man slashed at the leathers with a knife, to free his horse, and started off.

Some one jogged at Lannigan's arm.

He looked round, caught a glimpse of Ogden, and snapped: "He's wounded Mrs. Tandy." Then he slewed his gun round, but it was too late. The masked rider was galloping down the main street, scattering people in front of him. Two or three shots were loosed towards him, but did no harm.

Lannigan rasped: "I want a horse, Ogden!"

There were several tied up near Pardoe's Hotel. He shot a swift glance at them, selected the one he thought would prove fastest, forked leather and, before anyone else was in the saddle, started off.

Lannigan kneed his horse and slapped its flank. Powerful haunches seemed to bunch, then the horse lengthened its stride. Lannigan felt the exhilaration of riding fast, knowing that he had selected his horse well.

OTHER RIDERS were behind Lannigan, now, but he was getting further ahead of them.

At first, the two-three hundred yards seemed too great a distance to be made up. Soon, Lannigan was no more than a hundred yards behind the man, who shot another desperate glance over his shoulder and used his spurs savagely. Lannigan was straight-faced, grim, steady. The masked man shot twice, wildly, without any hope of hitting Lannigan. Lannigan held his fire. In another two or three minutes—

Crack!

A shot came from the side. He glanced towards it. There was a tiny shack, nestling beneath a clump of trees. He could see no one, but he knew that some one had fired a Winchester from that direction.

Crack!

His horse faltered, suddenly, and then crashed. One moment Lannigan was sitting in the saddle, in complete control of the beast, the next he was flying over its head, unable to save himself. He hit a patch of grass, which softened the blow, although it jolted him severely. He lay there, breathless. Two riders flashed past and he heard more shooting.

He straightened up.

Ogden and two other men came

riding and Ogden reined in. Lannigan was too breathless to speak, and Ogden jumped from the saddle and hurried towards him.

"How're yuh, Lannigan?"

Lannigan gasped: "That—t h a t shack," and pointed.

But he was too late. Ogden would always be too late for everything. A single rider appeared for a moment from behind the shack, but was soon hidden by the trees.

"Get—him!" Lannigan gasped.

Ogden forked leather fast enough, and the two men with him started in pursuit of the man who had shot at Lannigan, but Lannigan had little hope that they would make a capture.

Lannigan stood up.

Two or three more riders were coming from Ridge City, all of them elderly men. They pulled alongside him.

"Any point in goin' on?" one asked.

"I guess not," Lannigan said, disgustedly.

He went to look at the borrowed horse. It was alive, but a quick inspection showed him that a leg was broken. It was lying quietly, breathing hard. He stared at it tight-lipped.

A man said: "That's Black Joe's bronc."

Lannigan said: "Yuh sure?"

"Dead sure."

"Then he won't be pleased," Lannigan said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he saw Black Joe, riding a borrowed horse. Hamilton of Double-O was with him. So were two or three riders from that outfit. Black Joe's face was twisted with anger, and when he saw his horse he dropped his hand to his gun.

"Damn yuh, Lannigan—"

"Yuh can't blame Lannigan," one of the old men said.

Black Joe rasped: "That so?" and pulled his gun.

One moment Lannigan was standing there, breathing hard, thinking partly about the man who had escaped but more about Marion Tandy. Next, he knew that he was in deadly danger, for his gun was lying yards away from him, and Black Joe was seeing red.

Hamilton snapped: "Joe, yuh—"

Lannigan flung himself sideways and Black Joe fired. Next moment, Hamilton had knocked his foreman's gun from his hand, and Lannigan was picking himself up again. The bullet had gone close, but had not touched him.

He said: "Yuh want to shoot yuhr horse, not me. He's in pain."

"Yuh'll suffer for this," Black Joe gasped. He seemed beside himself with rage. "Yuh'll pay for—"

"The horse. Okay," said Lannigan.

"That was the best horse in Ridge, it—"

Lannigan said to Hamilton: "Can't yuh take him away?"

He thought that the foreman would shoot again; perhaps he was suddenly conscious of the hostile gaze from all the men there; perhaps he knew that three guns were trained on him. He turned away with an oath, and rode off towards Double-O. Hamilton and the other men of the outfit followed him.

One of the old men said: "Yuh'd better watch out for him, Lannigan."

"Looks like," said Lannigan, laconically.

He walked to his gun, then to the horse. He saw the deep scores in the flanks where Black Joe had often used the spurs with knife-sharp rowels. He made sure that there was no reasonable hope of saving the beast; and then he put the gun close to its forehead—

He turned away.

MANY THINGS seemed to happen at once, then. Ogden came back with the men who had ridden with him, to report that the man who had been hiding near the shack had managed to escape in the wooded land which lay beyond. A solitary rider came from the main trail. Lannigan watched, and soon recognized Cray.

Cray drew level with them.

So Cray had followed that masked rider, and if any man could have caught him, he could.

Cray said: "That's one outlaw less. And one other."

The harsh voice, the expression on his face, both combined to strike all of them to silence. Something had happened which had hurt Cray, the marks of the hurt were in his eyes.

"The Boy was riding with me," he said. "I sent him round to head the other man off. I kept on the main trail, gaining plenty. The Boy was longer than I expected. They met, almost face to face. The Boy got his." The words were uttered without any emotion, but the emotion was there, in his eyes. "I gave that murderin' coyote six," Cray ended, simply.

Lannigan snapped: "Yuh want that outlaw's body, Sheriff. Maybe he'll have papers on him which will help to find Corliss."

Ogden drew a hand across his forehead. "I guess—I guess that's so," he said. "Okay." He beckoned the elderly men with him, and they rode off. Lannigan called: "And yuh want to bury The Boy."

Cray said: "The vultures can't get at him, I've seen to that." He was sitting, solid as rock, in the saddle. "Ogden is as much use as—" he broke off, as if his bitterness was too deep for words. The hurt was still in his eyes, and Lannigan realized that he had been fond of The Boy... Cray said: "Was Mrs. Tandy hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Let's find out," said Cray. They started off, and he began to talk again, more freely. "Mrs. Pardoe shouted out've a window what had happened. The Boy was in the saddle quicker'n knife. He was—mighty fond've—Mrs. Tandy."

He fell silent, and they rode on.

22

NEWS WAS good. They had it from Doc Jordan himself. The fat man was standing outside Pardoe's Hotel, and it seemed to Lannigan that he had been waiting for his return. He looked up with a tight-lipped smile, and said: "She's not badly hurt, I guess."

Cray grunted: "Yuh sure?"

"It wasn't much more than a scratch," Jordan said. "It will leave a small scar, but no more. If she'd been sitting upright, I guess she would have had that bullet nearabouts the heart."

Lannigan thought: "At least I saved her from that."

Jordan, obviously, knew what had happened. So, it proved, did most of the people of Ridge City. Marion had told the doctor and Mrs. Pardoe, and Mrs. Pardoe had spread the story. Lannigan saw people whom he had never noticed before wave to him across the street. Others came up and slapped his shoulder, patted his arm, and shook his hand.

Lannigan tasted popularity.

It seemed like something in the air itself. It was good to breathe. It made him feel more cheerful than he had for a long time. It mattered that he had the support and the friendship of these people, not for its own sake but because of what it might mean. Ogden was useless; he had proved that too often.

Jordan said: "Yuh'd better go in, Lannigan."

Lannigan nodded. Cray said. "I'll be downstairs." He went into the saloon while Lannigan went into the hotel entrance and up the stairs. A man was standing on the landing, gun in hand. He grinned at Lannigan, and said:

"Yuh're okay, I guess."

"Who thought of putting yuh here?" Lannigan asked.

"Mrs. Pardoe," the man answered.

Lannigan nodded and smiled; so Mrs. Pardoe was taking no more chances. The good impression he had formed of the woman increased.

"Yuh'll find her two doors along," the man said.

There was a small room two doors along, and Mrs. Pardoe's voice was coming from a room beyond. Lannigan coughed loudly. Mrs. Pardoe came out, and the severity of her face softened when she saw him.

"So yuh're all right," she observed.

"I'm not touched, ma'am."

"She'll be glad to know that," said Mrs. Pardoe.

There were limits to her broad-mindedness. She had not objected to leaving Mrs. Tandy and Lannigan alone in the drawing-room, but she would not do so in the bedroom, which was next to the small room. Marion was lying in bed. Her shoulder was bandaged; the other was covered with a flimsy nightdress. She looked a little different from when he had talked to her. Her smile at sight of him lifted Lannigan's spirits still further.

"Did you get him?" she asked.

Lannigan said: "No ma'am."

The elation faded. And he had yet to tell her about The Boy. He had to make it clear to her that she must tell him everything she could about Tandy. She seemed to read something of his feelings in his expression, for her smiled faded.

He went on: "No, ma'am, I didn't get him, but Cray killed him—after The Boy had been shot dead."

Thus it came, quick, brutal. Mrs. Pardoe drew in a sharp breath. Marion's colour faded, he saw her hand clutch the sheet. There was silence for a moment, and then Marion said in a low-pitched voice: "You were right in your requests, Mr. Lannigan. And—I've been talking to Mrs. Pardoe. She can tell you what you want to know. But it is not to be used without other evidence. You agreed to that."

"I still agree," said Lannigan.

MRS. PARDOE followed him, and pointed to a chair in the small room.

She said: "There isn't much to tell you, Mr. Lannigan. Mrs. Tandy believes that her husband is connected with Corliss. She believes that for some time he has been working against Grant, of Double-C. She believes that he wants complete control and ownership of the whole country, just for the sake of the power it would give him. She believes he went to see Corliss the other night, and she sent Benson and The Boy to try to find out."

Lannigan said: "Has she any reason for her suspicions?"

"Yes."

"What reason?"

"For a long time there has been bad feeling between him and Jem Grant. She believes that Tandy hates Grant.

"No more than that?"

"If there is more, she did not tell me," said Mrs. Pardoe. She was speaking in a soft voice, leaning back in a chair, her eyes narrowed. "I do not think there is any more, Mr. Lannigan. Not that it will help you find Corliss."

"Me and others," Lannigan said.

There was a momentary twinkle in the old woman's eye.

"No one expects you to get him on your own, Mr. Lannigan!" The twinkle faded. "I can tell you one other thing. I am not sure that I am right to, but I will. Believing him to hate Grant, believing him to be prepared to do anything to get complete control of the county, she has turned to —hate."

Those quarrels. Her high-pitched voice, as if something changed in her when she talked to Tandy—those things were easy to understand, now.

Lannigan nodded.

"But he is her husband," said Mrs. Pardoe.

Lannigan said: "And she has been loyal, ma'am."

"She has trusted you. Unless you get proof, you will not use this against Tandy, will you?"

Lannigan said: "No, ma'am. But there is one thing you should know, even if she does not. Jem Grant and Long Pat, of Double-C, are sure enough that it's Tandy. If they are finally convinced of that—"

"If they take the law into their own hands, that cannot be held against you," Mrs. Pardoe said.

Lannigan nodded, and stood up. He went downstairs and rolled the makings one-handed as he stepped into the main street.

He turned into the saloon, ate well, and was about to leave when one of the old men whom he had seen on the trail with Ogden came in and approached his table.

"Can yuh spare half an hour,

Lannnigan? The sheriff would like t'see yuh?"

"Surely. Right now," said Lannigan.

It was twenty minutes afterwards that he left the sheriff's office, with a star pinned to his shirt.

There was much more to do.

Across the street, Cray was standing. He raised a hand and came towards him. He grinned sombrely.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he said.

Lannigan smiled. "That's enough of that," he said. "I've asked Ogden to swear yuh in, also, and he's waiting for yuh."

Cray looked actually scared. "Me! Now listen—"

But he went towards the office soon afterwards, looking apprehensive. Lannigan smiled as he walked toward Doc Jordan's.

JORDAN agreed. "Yuh don't have to have any proof against them to bring them into the lock-up," the doctor said. "I'm a justice, Lannigan. I'll hear a charge and commit them to trial: Yuh might have trouble getting them here, but that's up to yuh."

Cray, who had just come in, grunted.

"Then we'll need to get in touch with Double-C," Lannigan said. "Long Pat's okay. And Pete. And maybe two-three of the others. I wish I could be sure that Grant would lend his men freely. He will probably think he can use them best himself."

Jordan said: "Yuh could try Grant first."

Cray said: "And maybe find out if Tandy's there by now."

"I guess so," said Lannigan. He looked at Jordan. "How many men from the township can I rely on, Doc?"

"Three-four, for riding with yuh," said Jordan. "The others would come, I guess, but they wouldn't be worth takin'. There's Arden..."

He talked for five minutes, then sent Beulah out with messages. Twenty minutes later, Cray and Lannigan, with three middle-aged riders, were on the Double-C trail. Lannigan liked the look of the men whom Jordan had recommended, and they had agreed to serve under him without hesitation.

Now darkness was falling again.

He saw a faint red glow on the horizon. There were no flames, just a red glow.

Cray, riding beside him, grunted: "See that?"

"Yes. What d'yuh make of it."

Cray did not answer. A few seconds later Lannigan felt the slope of a low hill, the one overlooking Double-C. T' e red was blotted out for a moment, but soon re-appeared. As it did so, he realized what it was.

The buildings of Double-C were glowing embers.

23

LANNIGAN said: "Slow down, all've yuh."

"Someone may be waiting for us," Lannigan said.

Cray did not speak again and they slowed down. They peered about them through the night, which was lit by that tawny red glow.

He saw no signs of riders.

"We're okay," he said, after a while. "We'll ride now."

All of them were eager to get closer. They galloped down the hill towards what remained of Double-C. The heat reached out and touched them when they were hundreds of yards away.

Cray uttered a question which had been in Lannigan's mind.

"Any one there, I wonder?"

"I'm hoping not."

They could see the lay-out of the outfit clearly. The shape of the big ranch-house was defined, so was that of the main bunk-house. The outbuildings were also destroyed. Nothing was left standing at Double-C except the fencing round the corral. The gate was open and there were no horses; that proved conclusively

to Lannigan that it had been no accident.

Cray said: "What's that?" in a taut voice.

The heat was so great now that their mouths were parched. There was a gentle wind, driving the hot air into their faces. Lannigan would have ridden to the windward but for Cray's hoarse question. Cray was pointing—

A man was there.

He said: "We'll soon see."

All of them rode towards the moving object, between the lines of red-hot wood embers.

Lannigan got down from his horse.

The ground was hot under his feet, the horse was restless. One horse reared, suddenly, and nearly threw its rider.

None of them backed away. Lannigan and Cray went towards the moving figure. A man was trying to move, using only his arms. His legs trailed behind him—

Lannigan said: "We've got to move him."

"Who is it?" asked one of the others.

"We don't yet know."

Lannigan, Cray and one of the others bent over the man. He had seen them, and was staring round. Lannigan recognized him and his heart was heavy within him.

This was Long Pat.

He said: "Take it easy, Pat," and then he motioned Cray aside. He eased Pat up. Soon he had the man in his arms. Pat gasped and winced. Lannigan walked slowly, steadily, out of the fierce embers, until he reached a spot where the ground was cool.

Gently, he put the burned foreman down.

Cray pushed a water-bottle forward. Lannigan moistened the injured man's lips. Long Pat was staring up at him his face twisted in pain. He kept trying to speak, but could not open his lips.

"Corliss—"

So Corliss was not dead.

"Got Tandy." Long Pat's voice was so low that Lannigan only just heard the words although his ear was within an inch of the dying man's lips. He repeated the words clearly.

"Corliss has got Tandy."

"An' Grant."

"Corliss has got Tandy and Grant."

"Pete—two-t h r e e others—ridden off."

Lannigan repeated the words and for the first time felt a spark of hope; there were still some Double-C men free.

"After them. Headed—the Ridge."

Lannigan repeated those words also.

"Hide-out—there," Pat said.

"Hide-out there."

"Tandy said—"

Pat's body heaved in a spasm of pain, his lips twisted, he uttered a long, gasping groan; and then he died.

THE FIVE men stood windward of the embers, looking at the glow. They had left Long Pat nearer the fire, for there was nothing they could do to help him, they had no tools with which to bury him; everything here had been destroyed.

Then Cray said: "Someone's ridin' this way."

Lannigan looked up. There was the sound of an approaching rider—only one, he judged.

"Split up," he said.

The hoofbeats drew nearer, and a man called out of the darkness: "Yuh ther', Lannigan?"

L a n n i g a n called back: "Yes. Who—"

"That's Tim!" exclaimed Cray, and there was some excitement in his voice. "That's Tim Morely!"

He rode towards Morely. They met a few yards in front of Lannigan and the others, who had bunched up again. In the old puncher's eyes there was reflected the red glow, as if his own eyes were also afire. He lost no time in saying: "Long Pat an' Benson were burned in there.

Cray said: "Benson too?"

"Sure. He couldn't move out've the bunk-house. Pat—" Morely's voice broke, then gathered strength again. "Pat had been talking to Tandy in the ranch-house. Corliss and all've twenty men rode in. Me an' the others rode off, aiming to attack later. They started the fire. They rode off

with Tandy and Grant. We followed them. We couldn't do a thing, the whole place was blazin', we couldn't do a thing, I tell yuh."

"We know you couldn't," Lannigan said, soothingly.

"The others are watchin' the Ridge," Tim said. "We-all saw yuh ridin'. I followed. I guess I thought I recognized yuh, Lannigan." His gaze travelled to the star on Lannigan's chest. "Yuh taken over from Ogden?"

"I'm helpin' him," said Lannigan.

"He needed help!"

Lannigan said: "Tim, how many Double-C men are there by the Ridge?"

"All there is left. Six."

"Have yuh seen any Double-O men around?"

"None." Tim drew in his breath. "An' I don't want to."

Lannigan said: "We'all will ride to Double-O, I guess. If they're workin' with Corliss, we can handle them on their own, they won't be expecting trouble. That will shorten the odds."

Tim said: "Yuh mean stop them joinin' up with Corliss?"

"That's so."

"Could do," said Tim. "It's worth tryin'."

There was general agreement, and Lannigan sensed that what was most wanted by these men was action: any kind of action to enable them to vent their wrath, a terrible wrath after the sight of Long Pat and the burned-out ranch-house. They said little more, but turned their backs on all that was left of Double-C and hit the Double-O trail.

He talked to Tim. The old man told him what had happened after leaving Arrowhead. He had caught up with Long Pat and Tandy. Long Pat had taken the old man's guns, but Tandy had given no trouble; all he kept begging was that they should look after Marion, and Tim had reassured him on that point.

They had stayed in hiding until dawn. Several of Corliss's men had stood near Double-C, watching, until a man had ridden up to them and they had gone off with him. Corliss, apparently, had withdrawn the guard from Double-C.

Tim said: "We could hear them talkin'. We knew yuh'd taken Marion away, that pleased Tandy. There was some talk that Corliss had been hurt —not bad, but hurt. He was plenty mad, the rider said."

Lannigan thought: "What a pity he didn't die!"

Tim went on to say that when Long Pat, Tandy and he had reached Double-C, only Pete and two other riders were there. Grant had gone off to look at the cattle which had been rounded up the day before. He had not returned until nightfall. Soon after nightfall the attack had come. Tim and the rest of the men, except for Long Pat, Tandy, Grant and poor Larry Benson had been just beyond the corral, ready to take action if action became necessary.

And then the fire had been started. The men had carried oil-soaked torches, lit them and then taken kerosene and poured it over all the buildings. In the fire which had followed, spreading so swiftly that nothing could be done by the watching men, the outlaws had ridden off, taking the two prisoners.

Cray called softly: "We aren't far from Double-O."

SOON, THEY were within sight of the buildings. Before then, they had muffled the hoofs of their horses and they approached in silence. There were two or three lights from bunk-houses and the ranch-house. Lannigan did not know how the buildings were laid out, but he could see that Double-O was much smaller than either Arrowhead or Double-C.

A man was singing softly.

The horses were quiet in the corral.

Half a dozen riders were sitting between two bunk-houses with a fire near them. A can was steaming over the fire. The faces of the men were familiar to Lannigan; he had seen them when he and Pete had been held up near Ridge trail. He watched them closely. Hamilton and Black Joe were not there.

He whispered: "How many men do they have?"

"Eight-nine," Tim said. "They're mostly all here."

Lannigan nodded in the gloom.

The Double-O men had no idea that any one was approaching. Even the horses seem undisturbed and gave no warning from the corral. Lannigan, Tim Morely and Cray got out of the saddles. The others rode round towards the ranch-house proper, with orders not to act until word came—an order or an emergency. Then Lannigan and those with him approached the group about the fire. The man was still singing.

Lannigan said clearly: "Don't talk, and put up yuhr hands."

It was as if the words paralysed every man there.

Lannigan said: "That's fine. Stand up, one at a time, and come this way."

Cray held a gun by the barrel. The first man reached him, he struck him sharply, and the man fell. Another followed. It was ridiculously easy, Lannigan thought. One man came forward, looking scared stiff, and his hands dropped.

"Keep off yuhr gun!" snapped Lannigan.

The man obeyed.

Two were standing up, waiting to be called; Lannigan felt that the danger of emergency was gone. Then suddenly a door opened and Black Joe's high-pitched voice sounded clearly on the air.

"Zaney, I want yuh—"

Black Joe stopped abruptly, as if he realized that something was the matter.

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ONE OF the posse called sharply: "Put yuhr hands up, Joe." Hamilton appeared in the doorway, a hand at his gun. The two men were confused and probably hardly able to see as they came out of the well-lit room into the darkness. There was no danger from them. But the two men still conscious by the fire took the chance that came their way because Lannigan's attention was on Joe.

A man whipped out his guns.

Cray fired; nothing distracted *his* attention. The crash of the six-guns filled the night air. Lannigan felt a sharp pain in his left forearm. The man who had fired plunged forward, shot through the chest. His hands fell into the fire, but he did not move. The second man made no attempt to help Joe and Hamilton.

Hamilton put up his hands as the posse moved, and one of the posse called out: "It's okay, Lannigan."

Hamilton said: "Lannigan what—" and then he stopped, perhaps because he saw the star on Lannigan's shirt.

Black Joe moved then!

Lannigan and all the others were quite sure that the shooting was over. They were careless. Black Joe's guns were in the hands of the posse. Lannigan was thinking that the wise thing would be to ride with them into the township and then go to join up with the Double-C riders.

Black Joe flung himself at him!

A posse man loosed a single shot, but it went as near to Lannigan as to Black Joe, and he did not fire again. Lannigan stepped aside swiftly, but could not get away from the wild lunge. One moment he was standing poised, the next Joe had crashed into him. Every ounce of the man's weight, added to the venom of his rush, carried Lannigan down. His head struck the hard ground. He felt powerful fingers grabbing his throat, followed by a fierce pressure which stopped him from breathing.

There was an odd noise in his ears, a terrible blackness, darker than the night, in front of his eyes.

Then the burden eased.

He was hardly conscious of it. He felt the fingers draw away from his neck, yet there still seemed a constriction and it was difficult to breathe.

Black Joe was lying unconscious, his head bloody from a crack from Cray's pistol.

There was no more trouble with the Double-O men. Cray took charge with unaccustomed awkwardness, but no one questioned his right.

"Hamilton, get inside, we want to

talk t'yuh." He signalled one of the posse to follow the rancher. "Tim, yuh'n the rest get these *coyotes* into Ridge an' see they-all are locked up. Then yuh-ll return to the trail, around where yuh say yuh left Pete an' the other Double-C men. By the fork, yuh said?"

"That's so," said Tim.

"Okay." Cray turned to Lannigan, who was breathing more easily but was still on his back. Cray had sensed that the right thing to do was to leave him alone for a while. He was unaware of Tim and two members of the posse lifting conscious or partly conscious men into the saddles, tying them securely one after the other until they were ready to ride. But he was fully aware of Tim Morely's approach, and his words: "We're ridin', Cray."

"Okay. If yuh can find any other fellers spoilin' for a fight, bring them."

"I will, I guess."

Lannigan sat up. Tim looked at him and grinned and said: "I'll be seein' yuh, Lannigan," before he turned away. The party rode off. Black Joe was still sprawled out, unconscious, and Hamilton with his one guard was still in the ranch-house. Cray said: "Take it easy, Lannigan," and went over to Black Joe. He bent down, felt his pulse, stood there for a moment looking blankly towards Lannigan. He let the big hand drop.

"I guess I must have hit him plenty hard," he said.

CRAY HAD to support Lannigan as far as the door. Once there, Lannigan was able to walk without help, although he was glad when he reached a chair and sat down. There was whisky and glasses on the table. Cray poured out three stiff portions, handed one to Lannigan and one to the guard, a man named Bartram. Only Hamilton, standing with his back to the window, without his guns, had no drink.

"Yuh're asking for trouble." He addressed Lannigan, in a thin, reedy voice which was surprisingly like Ogden's. It was because he was nervous, Lannigan knew. "Yuh've no right to that badge, an' when—"

Cray said: "Shut yuhr trap. Lannigan's sworn in."

He said shortly: "Yuh know why we want yuh, Hamilton."

"I—I guess I've no idea. I—"

"Yuh've been workin' with Corliss. Lyin' won't help yuh. This time yuh can see for yuhrself I'm not Corliss."

Hamilton tightened his lips, but said nothing.

Lannigan looked at Cray. "Can yuh use a whip, Cray?"

Cray's eyes actually lit up. "Why, sure," he said. "Especially on a *coyote* of this kind. I'll go get one." He hurried out, and Lannigan smiled faintly, knowing that there was much more in Cray than he had ever dreamed.

He came back, swishing it through the air, a fine cowhide whip with a long lash. He flicked it out; it went within a couple of inches of Hamilton's face, and the rancher backed away and banged his head on the window.

Lannigan said: "Yuh've ridden with Corliss, Hamilton."

Hamilton muttered: "I—I had to do what I was told. Corliss is my owner, he owns this outfit. I—"

Lannigan said: "That's a lie. Tandy owns it."

"Tandy sold out, Tandy sold out a long whiles back!" gasped Hamilton, and once again doubts about Tandy's guilt came strongly to Lannigan's mind. "I don't know why," Hamilton went on, and he seemed desperately anxious to talk now. "Corliss took over himself two-three months back. I didn't know what he was planning until two-three days ago. Then it was too late."

Lannigan said: "Too late for what?"

"To back out. By rustling some Double-C beeves we—we had made trouble for ourselves. We didn't realize Corliss was the owner, we—"

Lannigan leaned forward and poured out another drink.

"What is Corliss planning?" he asked.

"To—to take over the whole of the county!"

"An' he's not working for Tandy?"

"No, he's fighting Tandy. He's got

some power over Tandy, I don't know what."

"Why'd he take the Double-C beeves?"

"To make trouble between Grant and Tandy."

Nearly everything was in Tandy's favour now.

"Why did he try to take that big herd?"

"He thought that would start open war between Tandy and Grant," Hamilton said. "I told him it was crazy. He wanted my men to help him. I wouldn't allow it." He hesitated, but when Lannigan said nothing, he added with a gasp: "It's true, I tell yuh, I wouldn't allow it!"

"An' I suppose yuh wouldn't allow him to ride on Double-C and set fire to it, roasting Larry Benson, who was wounded, and Long Pat, who had to stay there."

Hamilton gasped: "That—t h a t didn't happen!"

Lannigan thrust out his hand. There was a burn mark on the back of it, and his sleeve was scorched.

"It happened," he said. "Now, Hamilton, yuh've one chance of helpin' yuhrself. Just one chance. Where does Corliss hide out?"

"In—in Ridge hills."

"We know that. What part've the hills?"

Hamilton said: "It's not far off the Ridge, I guess. I couldn't explain just where."

"Can yuh lead us there?"

After a long pause, Hamilton said: "Sure. Sure, I can lead yuh there."

"Then that's what yuh'll do," Lannigan said, "an' if yuh make trouble or give any warning, yuh'll get lead in the back—a lot of lead."

BARTRAM and Cray got food from the kitchen. Hamilton either would not or could not eat. The others ate well. Lannigan put other questions to Hamilton, and the whole picture gradually built itself up in his mind. It started from the fact that Corliss had a hold over Tandy, Hamilton did not know what it was. And for some time, Corliss had been taking over various of Tandy's possessions, including the other outfits. Only Double-C and Arrowhead were not formally owned by Corliss, it seemed, but Hamilton was sure of one thing. There were no riders at the smaller outfits. Until the war with Double-C was over, Corliss had let those outfits look after themselves.

Hamilton said that Corliss had about thirty men in the hills. At most, Lannigan knew that the posse would number fifteen. But with the danger of an attack from the rear apparently gone, the chances were much brighter.

He stood up abruptly. "Let's ride," he said, and all of them went out.

25

LANNIGAN and the men with him reached the fork trail and waited until T i m Morely and Bartram arrived. They had with them three other riders; so they were seven strong, plus Hamilton and the Double-C men. Tim said: "Double-C are spaced out in twos, watching the Ridge." The whole party rode along, Tim in the lead. Now and again he let out an eerie cry, the cry of a coyote. And suddenly it was answered.

Two men appeared out of the darkness.

"I've brought Lannigan an' others," Tim said. There was a murmur of greetings between them all, and Tim went on: "Where's Pete?"

"Further along," said a Double-C man.

"How many of yuh are there in all?" asked Lannigan.

"Seven."

"M a k i n g fourteen," Lannigan mused. "I guess that's enough."

They rode along, and found Pete with two other riders and, a little further along, the remaining two men. The whole party was together for the first time. It was clear that none of them were under any illusion as to the task they were facing. None of them questioned Lannigan's leadership.

He turned to Hamilton.

"Which is the best way up?" he demanded.

"I—I guess it's all guarded," Hamilton said. "Since the girl was taken away the other night, Corliss hasn't taken risks. He has a man stationed every two-three hundred yards."

Lannigan said: "Yuh sure?"

"I'm dead sure. I reckon they can hear us," Hamilton added, nervously. "Maybe they don't know how many of us there are, but sound travels up that ridge. Yuh can't surprise them."

"Can't we? We can try, I guess." He kept his voice low as he went on: "Can all've yuh hear me?"

There were murmurs of assent from every one.

"Then listen. I'll take Cray, Pete and one other—yuh, Bartram, if yuh're ready for it—an' Hamilton. We'll go up further back, nearer the trail. The rest of yuh will make an attack on the Ridge about here. Don't take chances, just make plenty've noise. Under that noise, we'll get up top. Hamilton can lead us to the hideout—and he will," he added, grimly. "Give us fair time—say, half an hour. Then withdraw and head for the Fall. Yuh can get up the ridge easier there than any place. Yuh can ride along the trail at the top of the Ridge and yuh shouldn't have all that trouble. Around sun-up, yuh'll be near here. That all clear?"

Some one said: "Sure."

"My party won't take action until dawn," Lannigan said, "and as soon as there's trouble, yuh'll be there to ride in to help. I'll try an' send one man to tell yuh just where to come, but maybe yuh'll have to listen for the trouble and then start quick. Is that all clear?"

A man asked: "Why split up, Lannigan?"

"For two reasons. We don't want Corliss and his men to know one party's at the top of the Ridge, and under the cover of yuhr attack we won't be noticed—that's if it goes right," he added, and there was a faint laugh in his voice. "We've got to hope that it will. The other reason—we want to get Tandy and Jem Grant alive. If we all attacked at once, we might win but those two would probably be shot. An' maybe we wouldn't win," he added, grimly. "It seems to me the best chance. Are yuh-all agreeing?"

No one said "No."

"Okay," said Lannigan. "We'll ride."

He led the way. Cray followed, then Hamilton, then Bartram and then Pete—little Pete, fully recovered from his wound, as eager to fight as any of them there.

The moon had long since set.

They reached the fork trail. For five-ten minutes they waited, and then suddenly there was an outburst of shooting further along. The other party had started to time.

He got off his horse and Cray followed suit. They started to climb the Ridge. The others were to wait until they had dealt with the two riders, plans for just such an emergency had been made.

Climbing up that Ridge was not easy. But for the shooting further along which was fiercer and louder now, they must have been heard.

Cray got to the top first, as he had once before.

Lannigan hauled himself over the edge.

OUTLINED against the sky were two outlaw riders, looking towards the fighting. They had a fine view of all that happened further along the trail, but they suspected nothing. On tip-toe, Lannigan and Cray went forward. They had both guns out—Lannigan held his right for shooting, his left-hand gun by the barrel. Cray moved likewise. They reached the two silent spectators; then one of the horses threw up its head!

Cray jumped forward.

Lannigan thought: "No shooting, there mustn't be shooting!" and he also leapt forward. The man he had selected had been warned by the horse's movement, and half-turned, a hand already on his gun. Lannigan smashed the side of his head with the butt of one Colt. The man took the full force of the blow and tumbled from the saddle. But the other man was still up, and grabbed Cray's wrist. Suddenly there was a spurt of flame and the roar of a shot. Cray gasped

and sagged. Lannigan thought: "Two shots are no worse than one," and fired. The rider reared up in the saddle, then slumped down and fell.

Lannigan called down: "It's okay." Then he stood absolutely still, afraid that the shooting here had been herd and that men might come riding fast. There was no sound, no suggestion of trouble. For the first time he dared to think of Cray. He hurried to the man's side. Cray was already getting up, and Lannigan asked: "Where'd he get yuh?"

"Shoulder, I guess." Cray's voice was thick with pain.

"Let me see," said Lannigan.

Cray winced when he touched the shoulder. Lannigan knew in a moment that the bone was smashed, the bullet was probably still there. In that darkness there was nothing he could do, and a light might bring trouble. He said: "Yuh'd better ride for Ridge, and see Jordan. Think yuh can make it?"

"I'm ridin' with yuh," Cray said.

"The quicker that shoulder—"

"I'm ridin' with yuh," Cray repeated.

"Help the others," Cray grunted.

Lannigan did so. First Bartram came over, then three horses, then Hamilton. Hamilton was cowed into complete submission. Pete helped up the remaining horses and soon they were all on top of the Ridge. Pete advised Cray to ride into the town. Cray made the same answer, and Pete shrugged his shoulders and did not argue.

Lannigan turned to Hamilton. "How far from here is Corliss?"

"Three-four miles, I guess."

"Yuh'll lead the way," Lannigan said, "and I'll be right behind yuh with a knife, Hamilton. One false move, and yuh'll be as dead as Black Joe."

Hamilton muttered: "I'll help yuh all I can."

They had tied up the wounded outlaws. Both men might die during the rest of the night, but none of the party worried about that. As they set off Lannigan was thinking that within an hour they would be in sight of Corliss's hide-out.

The shooting had stopped further along.

Lannigan thought: "We might get through quickly."

The ride was slow and wearisome. Now and again Cray grunted when his shoulder, bandaged as well as Lannigan could do it, was jolted. There was little other sound. Hamilton certainly knew the way, and, after nearly an hour's ride, he turned his head and whispered:

"We're getting near."

"How near?"

"Yuh should see a fire almost any time."

HE WAS RIGHT. There was a fire glowing. Corliss and his men felt so safe there that they had not worried to keep it inside a shack. The firelight showed three or four shacks, many horses in a big corral and several men lounging about in the open. There was another man, quite near. Lannigan to feel uneasy. Corliss had placed guards near the camp as well as on the Ridge. He must have sent a strong party to the fight further along; how could he manage that with only thirty men?"

Hamilton whispered: "There's a guard."

"I'll pass yuh," Lannigan whispered back.

A cry from Hamilton, then, and the whole camp would have been warned. Lannigan felt his heart racing as he squeezed past the man, then climbed from the saddle. The guard obviously suspected nothing. He was just inside a belt of trees which surrounded the clearing.

Lannigan was within two yards of him, his knife bared.

Another step, and the knife flashed—

A minute later, he was back with the others.

"We're safe enough from this side," he said. "I guess we'll wait."

It wanted an hour to dawn. Waiting for an hour within sight of the encampment was going to be difficult, but dawn was the time he could expect his other party to ride in.

Pete stepped softly to his side.

"Need we wait?" he asked.

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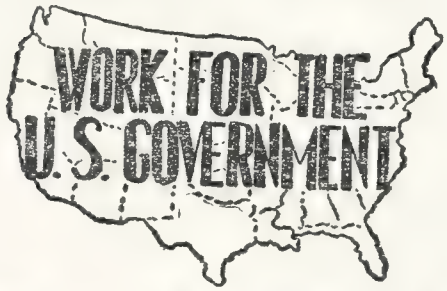

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"I've been wondering," Lannigan said. "I—"

Hamilton, standing a little way off, took a step towards the clearing. Lannigan saw him out of the corner of his eyes. In a flash, Lannigan moved towards him. Hamilton turned round and sent him one scared glance, then stood quite still.

Lannigan said: "So yuh'd try, would yuh?"

Bartram had followed. He said savagely: "We ought to kill the *coyote*."

"We need him for evidence," Lannigan said.

They dealt with Hamilton as they had dealt with his men at Double-O. As they did so, Lannigan weighed up the situation. Cray was no better now than half a man There were three, *only* three, effectives. It would be madness to take a chance now. He said so to Pete, who grunted assent. They settled down to wait until dawn.

Three or four outlaws rode in soon afterwards. They went to the middle of the three shacks. One of them went inside, the others waited. Voices travelled faintly across the clearing. Then the man came out again.

Corliss appeared on the threshold. He raised his voice, and suddenly men appeared from all over the clearing, hidden until then in the shadows. Lannigan watched, his lips tightening. Hamilton had lied; there were at least twenty-five men here. Corliss's strength could not be less than fifty.

Suddenly, on impulse, Lannigan moved.

"I'll be seein' yuh," he said to Pete. "Do what was planned if I don't come back."

In that moment he had felt a desperate need to hear what Corliss said. The men were gathering about him to take orders.

Lannigan skirted the belt of trees.

Three men were walking from a bush near where they had been lying. He walked softly after them.

Corliss' metallic voice rose suddenly.

"Listen, all've yuh. Lannigan and his party have ridden towards the Fall. They'll come up that way. We won't be in time to stop them. What

we have got is eight-nine men *behind* them. Yuh-all will ride out and meet them by White Rock. I don't want one've them alive—d'yuh hear me? Not one alive."

26

HE HAD forgotten his own danger in the danger which faced the party riding in. He blamed himself. He should have realized that Corliss would be up to all the tricks. The truth, which he did not admit then, was that Corliss was too strong in numbers to be beaten by ordinary tactics. In such fighting as was soon to start, numbers counted most.

Lannigan was on the fringe of the main party.

He joined them as they led horses out of the corral. He took a horse which was already saddled for quick action but which no one else claimed. He rode with the main party to the trees and then took the first opportunity to move to one side. For a breathless moment he waited, lest he had been noticed. No one had done so, all were pressing forward. He rode towards the spot where he had left his friends. He knew that he might be in danger if he went in the saddle, so he climbed down and approached on foot. The noise of moving riders rustled everywhere and helped to drown the sound of his own movements.

He saw Hamilton, lying trussed up, and Bartram and Pete near him. Cray was standing a little way off.

He whispered: "Pete, hold yuhr fire." He crept forward, seeing them watching, with hands on their guns, afraid of a trick. He stood up and was recognized. In a moment he was with them talking urgently.

"Before our men reach White Rock, they've got to be warned," he said. "There's only yuh to warn them. Do yuh know the hill country well enough to—"

Cray said: "I do, I guess. I know've a short cut. Two-three riders can

(Continued On Page 90)

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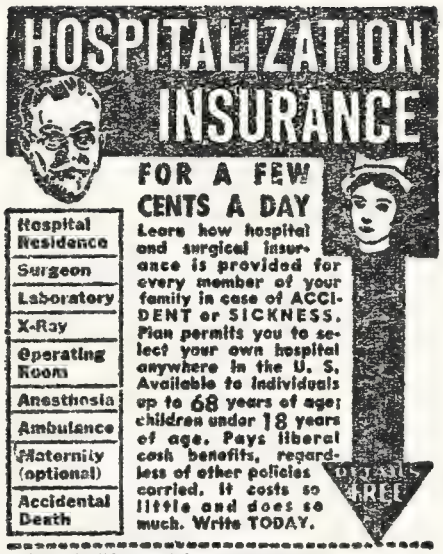
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(Continued From Page 89)

make it, a big bunch like them *coyotes* can't. I'll ride."

Lannigan hesitated.

"I'll ride," Cray said. "Me'n Bartram, I suggest. We can head off the others. Mebbe I can find a way of leadin' them back here. At worst, I c'n save them from that ambush." He drew in his breath. "I'll ride," he repeated.

Pete and Lannigan helped him into the saddle.

Pete said: "That's that, I guess. There's no more we can do."

"There's one thing," said Lannigan, slowly.

"What's that?"

"Get Corliss."

Pete drew in his breath.

"Corliss is the one man who holds these fellows together," Lannigan went on. "Without him, I guess, they will break up, even if it's only by quarrelling among themselves. There's a chance of that, anyway. We can get Corliss, who's still here, an' maybe free Tandy and Grant. We would learn plenty. There aren't above three-four men left as guards."

Pete said: "I'm with yuh, I guess. How'll yuh start?"

"There's only one way," said Lannigan. "We'll ride an' we'll ride fast up to the shack. We can get there before they realize what is happening."

"Ready," Pete said, laconically.

"Let's ride."

They reached the edge of the clearing without raising any alarm, and then they kneed their horses. From walking pace, their hoofs thundered wildly on the turf. Between the edge of the clearing and the shack were two hundred yards of clear ground.

And dawn was breaking; there was more light.

A SHOT rang out, a second. Lannigan crouched low in the saddle in that short desperate burst. Pete was almost touching him. Another shot came and a third, but they were travelling too fast to be hit. As they neared the door of the shack, it opened and Corliss appeared, guns in his hands.

Lannigan fired at him with both

guns, riddling the doorway. There was no time for quarter, no time for compunction. The bullets roared out as Corliss was standing there, an easy target. Someone inside shouted. Corliss went down. A bullet struck Lannigan's shoulder, high up. He reached the doorway, leapt down and jumped over Corliss, who was still on the floor of the shack. The fact that the man was helpless hardly seemed credible.

Men were rushing forward now.

Lannigan shouted: "Inside, Pete, we'll hold them off!"

There was the one chance, to get inside, to fight against any attack, and to win time to think and to plan. There was nothing else to do.

There were two lamps burning in the shack.

Tandy was in one corner, Jem Grant by the wall. Lannigan hardly noticed the most significant thing at first—*Grant had a gun in his hand.* Grant, a prisoner, was armed!

Pete tumbled in. Lannigan heaved Corliss out of the way and slammed the door. Two bullets entered, one buried itself in the wall, one smashed a window. The door was shut tightly and the bullets thudded against it.

Lannigan looked down at Corliss. A glance was enough to tell him that the man was dead. Not once had they met face to face until that wild ride, and Corliss was dead, the outlaws had no leader.

Pete said: "It won't be easy."

"I guess not," said Lannigan, and turned to Grant. "Glad to see yuh again, Grant," he said—and then he saw the Colt in the rancher's hand, pointing towards him, covering him and covering Pete.

* * *

GRANT stood there, scowling; the man who had never smiled. Grant, armed, covering his rescuers. It did not make sense.

Grant said: "Yuh've made some mistakes, Lannigan."

Pete gaped. "Jem, yuh—"

"Shut yuhr mouth!"

Any doubt in Lannigan's mind of the significance of this faded abruptly. *Grant worked with Corliss.* In a flash, he understood how simple it

(Continued On Page 92)

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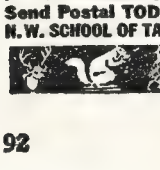

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 91)

had been. Grant, pretending Tandy had been the cause of the trouble but knowing that Tandy was not. Grant, working up feeling against Tandy; Grant, betraying the mission to capture Tandy, sending word to Corliss, who had immediately raced to Arrowhead. If Grant had his way, Corliss would have reached Arrowhead first.

Grant had rustled his own beeves, to make himself seem a victim. All the things that were not understood became clear then.

Grant said: "Yes, yuh've made mistakes, Lannigan."

Lannigan did not answer. Pete stirred—and Grant fired once, hit Pete's right hand, then turned back as if it did not count with him. Pete stared down at his wounded hand, at blood dripping from it. He was dazed, but not only from pain.

A man called out from the clearing: "Mr. Grant, yuh okay?"

"I'm okay," Grant called. "I'll open up in a minute." He looked back at Lannigan with a faint smile on his lips, the first Lannigan had ever seen. "Yuh're mighty surprised, Lannigan," he said. "Yuh aren't the only one. Tandy was kind of surprised. So was—"

Lannigan said: "Yuh sound proud of yuhrself."

Grant laughed. It was an ugly sound.

"I'm mighty proud," he said, after a pause. He glanced at Tandy. "It's been a fight between us for a long time. Only I didn't let Tandy know I was fighting all the time. And I was clever, Lannigan. I wanted Tandy's outfits. I wanted to own Ridge County, *and I do!* I needed a weapon against which Tandy couldn't fight. I found one. Tandy's son."

Tandy opened his lips, and shut them again.

Pete said: "Yuh—yuh're talking crazy."

"Be quiet!" Grant snapped at him. "Tandy's son—Corliss. As bad as they come. He suited me fine. I brought him here and strengthened his forces. Corliss was to cause all the trouble. I was to suffer a little—I have suffered, haven't I? And no one

will know the truth, Lannigan. When it's over, Corliss will be dead—he would have ridden out, anyway. Tandy would be dead, killed by Corliss. There won't be any one to take over this county except me."

Pete gasped: "But—but the fire—"

This time Grant answered him.

"I shall operate Double-C from Double-O. I want the people to think I've suffered badly. I want them to think I've driven Corliss and his men away. I want no trouble with the Federal authorities or Ogden. Yuh see how easy it will be, Lannigan? All the years I've been planning for this, using everything to make Tandy look guilty of all that's happened, I've kept one thing in mind. No one must suspect me. No one ever has—except Long Pat. He died to-night."

Lannigan drew in a sharp breath.

Grant went on: "Tandy once owned most of this county, yuh know that. Everywhere I turned, I was stopped by Tandy. I couldn't move without him, I couldn't get past him. He wanted complete possession, so did I." He laughed again that ugly sound. "He was a mean cuss but he fought the way he thought was fair. I didn't. That's the difference. But no one will ever know, Lannigan. I hated Tandy." Grant spoke as if the old man were not there, were dead. "I did everything I could to put people against him. I worked on Doc Jordan—Mrs. Pardoe—every one I could." He seemed to tire of talking, now, and paused for a moment. Then he grinned. "Yes, even his wife! They've never been man and wife. After they were married I told her—"

Tandy said: "Now I understand." He spoke very simply.

Grant said: "That won't do yuh any good. I told her all anyone could about Tandy, and she didn't like it. Tandy was jealous, but yuh ought to know that by now. If yuh hadn't ridden in, Lannigan, a lot of things might have been different, but the end would have been the same. And this is the end. After yuhr other party has been wiped out, all've these men will ride out. They'll be well paid. I've arranged for Federal troops to be here in a week's time. That was to

(Continued On Page 94)

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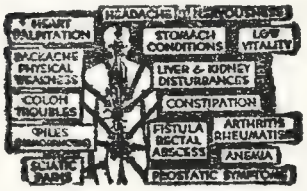

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 93)

make sure that Corliss and his men went off; they might have tried to take over from me if I didn't take that precaution. Now yuh've finished Corliss for me, that's saved me some money."

Pete spoke again, in a strangled voice. "Grant, those men ridin' into ambush are yuhr men, they've worked for years at Double-C."

Grant snapped: "So had Long Pat. So had yuh." He laughed again. "We needn't talk any more," he said, and raised his gun.

Tandy jumped at him.

All of them had forgotten Tandy, even Lannigan. Now he jumped and Grant half-turned in surprise. He fired twice. A bullet struck Tandy in the chest, but Lannigan and Pete leapt together. It was Pete's bullet which went through Jem Grant's head...

When they turned to Tandy, he was dead.

* * *

FROM OUTSIDE there came a sharp cry: "Yuh okay, Mr. Grant?"

There was a pause, one of great danger. In it Lannigan, with the facts weighing heavily upon him, hardly knew how to find his voice. But he did find it.

"I'm okay," he said. "Yuh can come in."

Was his voice like Grant's—sufficiently like Grant's? There was another pause, then footsteps. Lannigan motioned to the side of the door. He himself opened it carefully. Pete began to shoot, and startled men dropped their hands to their guns too late. Two turned tail and raced towards the corral, two were left in front of the door.

Lannigan said: "Let 'em ride. Yuh can use both hands mighty well, Pete."

Pete gulped, looked at his right hand, so shattered and bloody; looked at Grant and Tandy, gulped again, and then said: "What—what about the others?"

"If I know Cray, he'll get to our party first. It won't be difficult after that."

WHEN THE Federal troops arrived, six days afterwards, they found Ridge City quiet, the range itself fairly quiet, but spasmodic trouble in Double-C land and in the Ridge Hills. They organized themselves to clear the hills, a patrol of thirty men who would finish their job before they came back.

Cray and Pete were at Mrs. Pardoe's, recovering slowly.

The whole story was known throughout Ridge City.

The first to hear it had been Marion. Lannigan told her, sitting in a small room at Mrs. Pardoe's. There was a bandage on Marion's shoulder, but the tiny wound would soon be healed. She was dressed in black. She listened to Lannigan's slow, halting story. There were tears in her eyes when he talked of Tandy, of Grant's story, of the deliberate poisoning of her mind against her husband.

Lannigan left her, with Mrs. Pardoe.

Against Jordan's advice, he went into the hills. The outlaws, realizing they had no chance against the troopers, were already thinning out. In one brush with them, a trooper shot a tall, bow-legged Mexican, and as Lannigan watched the man walking into captivity, he saw also the marks his boots made. They were like the marks made, what seemed an age ago, in the ground near a desert water-hole.

The troop wondered why he started to laugh.

In ten days, he was back in Ridge City. Among the first people he saw was Mrs. Pardoe. He asked how Marion was.

"She's at Arrowhead," Mrs. Pardoe said. "Tim Morely's with her, so is Cray. They're waiting, I guess."

"Waiting for what?" asked Lannigan.

Mrs. Pardoe said: "It's yuhr turn to guess."

Lannigan went there after sundown. As he approached, he saw a white dress showing in the light from the window. He saw the white dress move. He heard Marion catch her breath.

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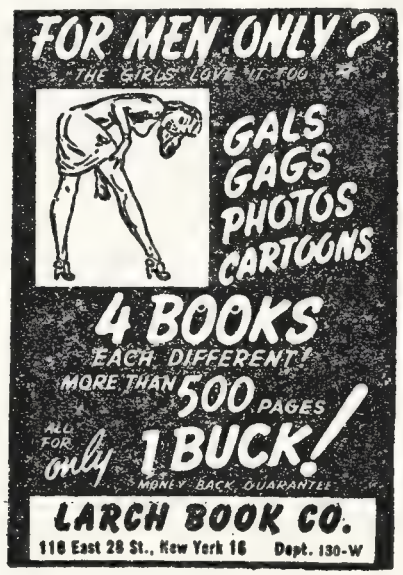

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

Of Real Western Stories, published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1, 1949.
State of New York)
County of New York:)
ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Real Western Stories and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Managing editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is — (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1949. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1950). (SEAL)

A Female Comes To Humbug

FACT ARTICLE by THE LAWDOG

IN THE year 1853, Humbug was a small western settlement, where miners lived. There were no women present in this rough frontier place. However, one day, a group of miners walked down the nearby creek. They discovered wearing apparel hanging on the bushes near a cabin that indicated the presence of a woman and a child. The news spread rapidly from the head to the mouth of the creek. And on the next Sunday, there appeared before the cabin no less than a hundred miners, dressed in their gorgeous woolen shirts and patched pants.

In those days it was not uncommon to see an old miner passing through a town with a pick, shovel, and a pan on his back. And as you gazed at his retreating form, you could read "Albant Mills Superfine, 50 lbs." in large letters on the patch on the seat of his pants. The miners had selected a spokesman for the occasion in the person of "Old Uncle Gilbert." The boys surrounded the cabin, and "Uncle Gilbert" mounted a convenient stump, loudly hailed the inmates of the cabin. A gentleman—all miners were gentlemen in those days—made his appearance. And "Uncle Gilbert" made the following address:

"Honored Sir. Do not for a moment be alarmed at this demonstration, for I assure you these gentlemen are quiet, peaceful miners, who were once partially civilized. Many of us have been in the mines one, two, or three years, without having had the pleasure of gazing upon a woman or a child.

"A day or two ago, in passing here, some of us noticed, hanging upon those bushes, garments, that denoted the presence of a woman and a child—that is to say, unless we have forgotten the garments worn in our childhood, and those of our mothers and sisters. Upon being informed of the suspicions of the brothers regarding the cabin and its inmates, we at once called a mass meeting, and resolved to proceed as a committee of the whole to investigate, being reassured by the wisest of us, that our mothers were women, and that singular as it may appear to you, we were once children.

"Now, my dear sir, allow me in behalf of my fellow miners and myself to tender to you and yours a hearty welcome to Humbug and the surrounding camps. Be assured that we congratulate ourselves on this most welcome addition to our community, believing it will prove a benefit to each of us, inasmuch as it will remind us of home and mother.

"My dear sir, you can be assured that your wife and child will be sacred objects to us, and while they cast their lots among us rough and somewhat uncouth miners, will be as safe from insult or danger as they would be within the limits of the capital of our country, surrounded by an army of police.

"Again, we bid you welcome to Humbug, and may God bless you, your wife and child."

At the close of this address the gentleman brought to the door a most beautiful woman and child and responded to "Uncle Gilbert's" remarks in a very happy manner. Then everyone cheered and the miners went on their way happy because a female had come to town. Chivalry had not yet died and the ghosts of King Arthur's men could be happy over their counterparts in woolen shirts, patched trousers, and pistols.

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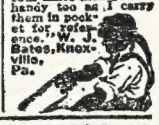

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